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# WAS HE JUSTIFIED

C. J. WILLS.



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WAS HE JUSTIFIED?

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# WAS HE JUSTIFIED?

A Novel.

BY

C. J. WILLS.

AUTHOR OF

*"The Land of the Lion and Sun," "The Pit Town Coronet," "John Squire's Secret," "The Great Dorémi," &c., &c.,*

AND OF

*"The Fatal Phryne," "Sibyl Ross's Marriage," "The Scudamores,"  
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# Dedication

TO

HENRIK IBSEN.

I DEDICATE THIS LITTLE BOOK TO THE GREAT  
SCANDINAVIAN MORALIST, AS A SORT  
OF APOLOGY FOR TRESPASSING  
ON HIS PRESERVES.

C. J. WILLS.

*Oriental Club, 1891.*

1150371



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# WAS HE JUSTIFIED?



## PROLOGUE.

IT was a stormy evening. Over Lynden Heath the clouds sailed with a swift, steady motion, for the wind was constant and strong. There was no thunder, but the lightning flashed silently. Lynden Heath is about two miles long and one mile broad. It occurs so suddenly, and is so distant from any land of the same kind, that the inhabitants of the western division of Wellingshire, where it lies, regard it as one of the wonders of the world. There is a little hill which overlooks it called Lynden Rise. Had any belated traveller crossed Lynden Rise on that wild autumn evening, he would have stopped in spite of the weather to

watch a figure that, spectre-like, moved up and down the heath. Swiftly the figure strode along a grassy path, turned, and strode back. Let us leave the supposed traveller, and, concealed under the invisible cloak, which is one of the belongings of all story-tellers, approach this figure nearer. On a closer inspection the figure loses its spectral appearance, and we find a tall, handsome man, who looks somewhere over thirty. He wears a horseman's cloak that hides his dress; but his three-cornered hat is richly laced, and there are gold buckles on his shoes. The frown on his face, deepening as he walks up and down into a thunderous scowl, is crossed occasionally by a twitching of the eyebrows, as his thought lightens and flashes through the night that has suddenly fallen on his life. Above is the broad sailing rack and the wide sky, around him the silent earth, but he is as effectually a prisoner on that little furlong of heath, where he moves backwards and forwards, as if he were a demon about whom a powerful

enchanter had drawn a magic circle. His thought holds him, and from that patch of land he may not go until he has picked the lock of his mental prison.

Under his cloak he holds a letter, which tells him that which a loving husband most dreads to hear.

He looks up, but he finds his own tragic thought on the face of heaven. Had he known—could he have known Lenan, he might have muttered:

“ The cold moor shivers and the wind is sighing,  
And from the heathland shimmering mists rise up ;  
The melancholy sky is slowly dying—  
Lo, from its hand the sun drops like a cup ! ”

Twilight passed, and night came—a moonless, starless night, and still he walked and wrestled in the spirit with himself upon that lonely path. The wind increased in fury, bringing up immense battalions of clouds, then ceased with a long wail ; some big drops fell ; the thunder came, and with

it a thunder-shower; but he heeded it not. The lightning blazed out, and he paused now and again to watch the ghostly landscape that appeared so distinctly, and then, like a fleeting vision, suddenly dissolved into the inky blackness of the night. Once, in one of the flashes, a hand clutched at his throat, and a haggard face and two wild eyes looked into his—only for a second; the replying glance was of such unearthly fierceness that the would-be robber slunk away before the man in the horseman's cloak had time to strike him.

Will he never make up his mind?

The forehead under that laced hat is a broad one. The man in the cloak knows that the resolution he takes now will be final. Is it not a strong man—it may be the strength of madness—who goes out to a lonely moor, and walks there from sunset till midnight until he has made up his mind, or is it merely a vacillating fool? He *makes* it up. Is it a powerful expression that every-day one, to make up



the mind? Kneaded, and rolled, and beaten, and baked, or burned to ashes in the crucible of jealousy and mixed with fell poisons, his mind *is* made up, and he says under his breath, but with an intensity of meaning that might etch the words in fire on the black tablets of the night, "If she will confess, though I cannot forgive her, I will leave her punishment to God."

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\*

The lady of Lynden Manor is ill, and no one sees her except her physician and her husband. She has been confined to her room for a week, sobbing and moaning; and now she is frequently delirious. She calls her husband by name, angrily, tenderly; she cries for her son, for her father and mother. Alas! her father and mother are dead; her little two-year-old boy has been sent away; and there is no woman about her but the grim and silent old housekeeper, who never leaves her side. Her husband watches her

night and day. Every morning and every night he asks her sternly, "Have you anything to confess?" and every time the question is put she turns her face to him and says with all her force—"No!" That is all that ever passes between them; if she addresses him he makes no reply.

Her delirium never prevents her from understanding and answering that question—"Have you anything to confess?" She puts all her strength into her "No;" and, on the ninth morning after she took to her bed, she put her life into it; and from the pale lips there issued, after the little fierce word, a red stream that stained her white neck and bosom. The world was told that being ill with a fever she had burst a blood-vessel in her delirium; but there were whisperings in the kitchen of anguished cries for bread and for water; and the woman who dressed the corpse told of a healthy body dreadfully emaciated, and of the marks of little teeth on the wasted arms.

A week after the death of his wife, the master of Lynden Manor sat in his low-ceiled study with letters on the table before him which he read and re-read. At last it was clear, as clear as daylight; his wife had been ingeniously calumniated. He read the letters over finally and then burnt them. Once more he had to make up his mind on a matter of life and death. He thought of the moor, but it was beautiful weather and the moon was full; he could not be alone in the dark there. "Ah!" he cried with a start. He knew where to go. In a wood behind the house stood the mausoleum of his family, the grim resting-place of his dead ancestors, and thither he bent his steps.

The silence of the charnel-house brought a nameless satisfaction, and when he knelt beside the new coffin, a flood of tears burst from him—from him, the strong man who had never wept before in all his life. He bent his head on the coffin, and knelt so for an hour.

When he left the mausoleum there was a radiance on his pale face, as of one who had talked with the blessed dead.

Until long after midnight he was busy in his study. His light was seen burning in the early morning by some roysterers returning home from the market-town; but nobody saw him steal into his little son, and kiss with trembling lips his rosy cheeks; nobody saw him leave the house. On his study table lay this brief note: "I am going on a long journey, and shall perhaps never return."

For thirty years from that morning nothing was known of his fate.

His son grew up, married, and there was again an heir. The young wife and mother, happy in the devotion of her husband and the smiles of her baby, hardly knew the meaning of the word care. She had been only half in love when she married; her husband was so reticent, so difficult to understand, that fear and affection strove together in



her heart; but, before the honeymoon had passed, perfect love had cast out fear. Understand him she never would, but she could trust him, trust him; ay, and love him too, which was far better. The effect of her gentle nature and deep, calm love for her husband upon the haughty aloofness (Coleridge used the word, and it's the only one that expresses what is meant), which was an heirloom in his family, became the talk of the country-side. At Christmas and at Easter, Lynden Manor, which in former times had known only a chance guest, was full to overflowing; until gossip said its master was ruining his estate—and not without some truth, as his heir subsequently discovered.

Gossip said also that there was a curse on the family, when the squire was brought home one night shot through the heart by a poacher.

It's a hard saying that—"Let the dead bury their dead," and can be wrested to many meanings. If it means—which probably it does not, theologically—that those only should mourn for the

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dead, attend them to their last resting-place, and visit their graves, whose hearts are, so to say, under the earth with the bodies of their loved ones: in her case it was a behest which the young widow fulfilled devoutly. For many months her heart was dead. It was not alone the sad end of her husband that had numbed her affections; but a dreadful thing came to light, the thought of which made her shiver to her dying day.

It was on the afternoon of the second day after her husband's murder, as she sat with dry eyes and pale face, holding in her listless hand a lock of dark hair, that the butler came to her mysteriously, and, with awe-stricken face, told her something that froze her to the marrow. But if she had softened and humanised her husband, he had given her a share of that unbending spirit of his, which had yielded and put off its iron independence only at her gentle suasion. She mastered herself, and although her steps tottered at first, when she came to the open air she walked

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before the servant towards the mausoleum without faltering. Arrived at the gloomy portal, she rather hung back; but again she controlled herself, and entered first. For some seconds she saw nothing in the semi-darkness.

“Here, madam,” said the butler hoarsely, for she was looking in the wrong direction.

She turned about and saw the thing he had told her of.

Upon an open coffin hung a mildewed suit of black clothes enclosing a skeleton, the right arm of which lay round the neck of another skeleton in the coffin. The two skulls were side by side; the empty eye-sockets glared into each other, and the lipless teeth grinned together. These were the remains of the father and mother of her dead husband. Long she stood and looked, while the servant retired respectfully to the entrance of the building. Her horror gradually gave place to fascination, and she touched with her cold fingers the white skulls. Then she examined the

coffin, and saw that the lining of lead had been hacked open, evidently with some inadequate instrument. As she moved, her foot struck against something; she stooped and picked up a rusty pocket-knife; one blade was broken, and the other so dented and ragged that thirty years' rust had not been able to hide its saw-like appearance. Again her foot struck against something; she picked it up, it was a pistol. She took it to the door and asked the faithful old servant to examine it. The rusty weapon was still loaded.

"How can he have died?" she said. "He must have taken poison;" and she went back to the coffin to search.

She did not find a vial or anything to indicate poison, but she did find a half sheet of paper covered on both sides with writing in pencil. At first she thought she would not be able to read it, but having gone out into the light of day, she gradually deciphered the faded, old-fashioned

scrawl, for it was very ill-written. It made her breath come short, and brought the tears to her eyes. This is what she read :—

“The tenth day, and I am still alive and able to write this. I did not mean to leave any message, but my mind has grown weak with my body, and I must write. There is one pang that makes this prolonged, physical agony as nothing ; my innocent wife—the wife I have foully murdered—was racked with these pains for nine days. Merciful powers, keep me alive for many days yet, that I may suffer more, much more than she did. Even had she been guilty—but how could I dare to think it of her ? What a foul wretch I was to stain her spotless soul with a sin as impossible to her as to one of God’s angels !—but had she been guilty, this was no punishment for her, these frightful pangs that have made me bite my tongue through, lest in my agony I should cry aloud.

“I must have swooned. It is almost dark now, and I began writing about mid-day. I am feebler,

and fear I shall die before my expiation has half satisfied myself. Oh! I should have brought with me bread and a little water! I could have kept myself alive to suffer longer. Assuredly, Heaven will never forgive me. What have such as I to do with Heaven—that Heaven in which murderers have no place? Misery, pain unending must be my portion here and hereafter; I could not be happy in Heaven remembering the pain I caused my dear wife. My brain is going. Heaven! Hell! Annihilation! Ah! those nine long days and nights that she moaned and screamed in wondering agony! Oh, God! blot them out of time, that they may cease in my memory. I shall go mad. But perhaps my wife loves me still, and perhaps her happiness will be incomplete in Paradise without me—perhaps!

“I have only a minute or two’s strength, a minute or two’s life. No one has thought of searching for me here. Should I yet be discovered, the pistol will serve my turn. I am slaying my-

self, as I slew my innocent wife. God have mercy on my soul."

When she had finished reading, she walked a few paces up and down in front of the mausoleum; then she re-entered it calmly, and, having placed the paper in the coffin, summoned her servants. She instructed them to place the husband's remains in the coffin with the wife's; and, when they had replaced the lid, she bade them reveal nothing of the gruesome tragedy of a bygone time.

It was almost a year after the death of her husband before the young widow began to live again. The worst symptom of her unfortunate condition during that time was her indifference to her child. Many attempts were made to rouse her maternal instinct, but they all failed, until Nature took the case in hand. They told her one morning that her son had scarlet fever.

"Get a nurse from London," she said.

But in the height of his fever she heard her boy moaning at night. She sat up in bed and

listened. The poor little fellow had ceased for many months to talk of, and apparently to think of, his neglectful mother. That night, however, some memory of old caresses stirred in his fevered brain, and he cried, "Mother, mother!" The feeble cry reached her heart. She hurried to his side, nor did she leave his couch until he was convalescent. Her interest in the world returned with the re-awakened mother's love.

The boy grew up very like his father. When he came of age he married, and finding his finances, owing to the too generous hospitality of his father, in a bad condition, he sold the estate, and put the bulk of the proceeds into the funds. With the remainder he bought a commission, and being sent to the Crimea, was killed at Balaclava.

Shortly after his death his wife bore a son, who is the hero of our story.

There is no doubt that the butler told his wife of the discovery in the mausoleum, for the story was known to all the neighbours of the family ;



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but the grandmother kept her secret, and neither her son nor her son's son knew of the vengeance wreaked by their ancestor on his unfortunate wife, and the subsequent justice which he wrought upon himself.



## CHAPTER I.

### A PISTOL GOES OFF.

ROBERT L'ESTRANGE swung a hammock in his sitting-room in King's Bench Walk, and determined to pass the summer in London for a change.

He was tired of travel; tired of hot summers and cold summers—his experience of them ranged from Reikiavik to Timbuctoo; tired of Switzerland, tired of Norway—after a fortnight of each; tired of summers anywhere—and of winters, and springs, and autumns. What he wanted was a new season, neither spring, summer, autumn, winter, nor a mixture of these in any proportion, but something entirely original; and so he stayed in London. Nature has a habit of repeating herself, especially in the matter of the seasons. Spring,

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summer, autumn, winter are, no doubt, four capital ideas ; ideas that bear repetition and that have been of great benefit to the world ; still it is only a song of four verses, and it becomes monotonous, even in England, where Nature makes many not wholly unsuccessful attempts to sing it backwards. Robert L'Estrange had been disgusted with the spring. It had, pretty much as usual, lasted from the middle of November till the end of February, with a violent eruption of summer at the beginning of the year ; for Nature was taking it rather *ad libitum* on the occasion of this performance. Winter had also been very tiresome. Beginning in March with three weeks of intense frost, it had boomed along with sleet and snow almost till the end of April, where it picked up the first two lines of spring, which, by rights, ought to have come in the beginning of November, and trilled them off with magnificent *bravura* passages into the middle of May. It was then, just when Nature was accustomed to drone out

the remainder of the English winter, that L'Estrange used to fly from the tedious inconsistency of the thing. In the year of our story, however, Nature forgot herself entirely, and before she knew what she was about, had plunged right into the heart of her summer song, and was so entranced by it herself that she couldn't stop, but kept singing it, "in full-throated ease," straight on till the very end of July.

On the fifteenth of May the sky was of such a deep blue, and the air so delightfully soft and sweet, that Robert L'Estrange became interested in the weather. Next day the blue of the sky was deepened a shade, and the air, even in the precincts of the Temple, seemed much less jaded than is habitual with the metropolitan zephyr. L'Estrange grew critical and forebore to pack. From dusk till the dawn of the seventeenth a bird sang in the Temple Gardens. L'Estrange would have sworn it was a nightingale, and waited one day more on the chance of its singing again. It

sang again, and for four nights in succession. Unable to find anywhere absolute originality in the weather, and thinking there was every promise in England of something only less rare, the true old English summer, that poets have sung and novelists have bragged of, but of which the oldest inhabitant can't remember an example—on the morning after the bird's second song, Robert L'Estrange swung his hammock in his sitting-room in the Temple, and determined to pass the summer in London.

What sort of man was this *dilettante* of the weather? On the first glance not a man to be influenced, in his going out to Piccadilly or to Peru, and in his comings in from the street or from farthest Ind, by any considerations of shine or shower. In no assemblage of men could the least observant have failed to note him. He stood six feet in his socks; but he was so compactly and so proportionately built, and carried himself with such ease, that, when he stood alone, he seemed

only of average height. He had a clear olive complexion ; black, curly hair ; teeth, perhaps a little large, but perfect, and dazzlingly white ; his lips, though thin, were so firm and red that men said they were too full, and women said—nothing, but looked twice and sighed ; his chin was round, strong, and slightly cleft ; he wore no hair on his face except a slight moustache—it was slight, because his upper lip had never felt the razor. His nose was short and straight ; his eyes gray and large, inclining to the almond shape ; his eyebrows, firmly marked and almost straight, the reverse of bushy ; and his forehead low and broad. The head was long, and the neck rounded but sinewy. A man, you would have said, fitted to undertake, and succeed in, enterprises like the chosen ones of the earth ; an ample man with capacity for anything ; a man most likely to rise to eminence in the army—certain, at all events, to carve his name deeply in the adamant, and high up among the loftiest climbers. For years his head had been

filled with ambitious dreams, and most of his friends still deemed him capable of scoring a big success, if he only cared to exert himself. One or two of those who knew him better had a slightly different story to tell, and among those who knew him best was Robert L'Estrange. Let the reader judge. Here is an extract from his diary, dated eighteenth of May, the very day on which he determined to spend the summer in London:—

“I am thirty-eight to-day, and it is high time I confessed here that I am a failure. I do not make any reservation—a failure absolute. I have begun many things, and never once succeeded. What am I? A barrister who has never practised; a journalist who never wrote a leader; a poet who never published a verse; a lover who was never in love; a student who knows neither everything of something nor something of everything, but who has scantily furnished a room or two in his brain with bric-a-brac and waifs and strays of useless knowledge; a traveller who has followed



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in the footsteps of others—a discoverer of other men's discoveries. Without any reservation, a failure; for the things that I have tried to do are do-able, and are done daily. I can't console myself with the knowledge that I have failed where only one man in a generation can possibly succeed; scores of men have struggled triumphantly past me over difficulties which I gave the go-by as soon as they cropped up in my path. I was certainly heavily handicapped. Six hundred pounds a year of clear income is a terrible dead weight to carry. It needs a much more powerful ambition than mine to obtain anything like a place, when the saddle-bags are too well furnished. I once tried to make myself poor; I thought if I brought myself to my marrow-bones, the having to do or die would stand me instead of ambition. Many a man whom I saw advancing steadily to eminence and fortune had no other incentive than the dread of starvation; but even the career of spendthrift, in spite of the broadness of the way

and the splendour of the company, was beyond me. The misery of my first and only debt, when I had exceeded my quarter's income by five pounds, I shall never forget; it made me feel as if I had sold my soul to the devil, and were doomed to perdition beyond reprieve; the earth turned unsteady; the elephant seemed to be tottering and the shell of the tortoise about to 'cave in;' and the clouds that muffled the sky looked like immense, dingy feather beds, with which justice, who on this occasion took the likeness of a black-amoor, intended to smother me—and all on account of that miserable fiver."

It was in the afternoon that he scribbled this, swinging in the hammock, which he had hung in a shady corner of his room. He used a pencil, and employed the little note-books in which he wrote his exceedingly non-diurnal diary for pipe-lights. Two or three leaves were left in them sometimes, but, as a rule, although he wrote irregularly, he kept his pipe in up to date, light-

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ing it at night with the page written in the morning, if there happened to be one. He did not parade this habit; none of his acquaintances knew it; and yet it was arrogant. There was no man more esteemed as a companion by all who knew him. Had he been less reticent many men were ready to swear eternal friendship, and to love him as men are seldom loved by men—it is so very easy to love a man with six hundred a year of his own; and as for the women, a glance of his wonderful gray eyes, frank as a boy's, yet deep, sultry and mysterious, was more fatal than a week of marked attention from adepts in flirtation. No woman, however, got more than a glance from Robert L'Estrange. It is a very high type of man of whom it is sufficient to say, and that without any limitation, "He is a gentleman." It means, as we all know, that there is no flaw in his birth, breeding or character. The sentence is often used conventionally of very ordinary men; but then it is spoken in an ordinary tone which

implies a limitation, and lowers the standard; more often the expression is, "He is a thorough gentleman," the "thorough" meaning, of course, that there is a vulgar fibre in the speaker, and, in all likelihood, in the individual characterised. On the rare occasions, when Robert L'Estrange was discussed, if any one said, to sum him up, "He is a gentleman," the tone implied that he was something over and beyond a gentleman, if that be possible. Indeed, with the exception of the "common cry of curs," who, having bitten each other mad with hate of everything better than themselves, yelp detraction at the heels of all, there were none of L'Estrange's acquaintances who did not regard him as apart from other men, as gentler, more modest, less sinful than other men, and withal devoid, as far as a man may be, of self-consciousness; in fact a Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche*. Yet there was probably no more arrogant man in London on that afternoon than Robert L'Estrange, scribbling his confession

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in pencil to be burnt in the worship of St. Nicotine at the Convivial Cannibals at night. Take his diary as an illustration. If he were in the mood he would spend hours over it, polishing and re-writing his sentences; and it was just those pages over which he spent most labour that he was certain to burn. Nobody knew anything of it but himself; he was arrogant only to himself. Applause for the performances of others, sympathy for their trials and successes, he had to bestow in abundance, and of genuine quality; for himself he had only the most arrogant scorn, and it also was genuine. It was an admirable point of view in many respects from which to regard oneself. We shall see, however, to what it led this man. In the meantime it led him to stay in London for the summer, and to give to himself a meteorological whim as a reason for doing so. He knew better, however. Behind the calm front which he showed the world, there beat a storm of unrest and dissatis-

faction, that knew no lull and increased in vehemence as he grew older. This man had done nothing, absolutely nothing he told himself. In his bitterer moments he sometimes felt as if it would have been better for him had he ruined himself—in pocket, body, and soul. He had realised simply Zero. A course of transcendental dissipation would have been something, for if we can't mount above Zero, let us get down below it, into the abyss, as far as possible; anything is better than a cypher, "Hateful to God and to the enemies of God."

The page quoted from his diary was all he wrote that afternoon. He meant to write more; but he had hardly finished the last sentence in the extracts given, when the report of a pistol startled him out of his hammock. The shot seemed to have been fired just outside his room. He opened the door at once, and saw a strange figure standing in the lobby. It was the figure of a man dressed in a very old-fashioned, broad-

cloth suit, still a dead black, for the stuff was admirable although the cut was bucolic, not to say Hyperborean, and a very old-fashioned beaver hat. The man was examining a smoking pistol he held in his left hand. The weapon seemed to be a very deadly engine, with a bore like a mortar and a flint-lock. The lobe of the man's right ear was shot away, and blood streamed copiously down his neck; but he stood looking intently into the barrel of the pistol, the muzzle of which was bigger than the eye-piece of a fair-sized telescope, as absorbed as if he had been a boy at a peep-show.

"It gae'd off," he said at last, looking round, and holding out the pistol with some pride—whether in the pistol itself, or in the fact that it had "Gae'd off," it would be difficult to say.

"I'm kitty, ye see," he said, having expended some more admiring glances on his weapon.

"Kitty?" queried L'Estrange, looking dubiously at a strong, iron-gray beard.

"Ay, a kitty, left-handed, ye ken; or I would ha'e shot mysel'."

"But you have shot yourself."

"Ay, my lug," he said, putting up his hand to his wounded ear indifferently, and shaking away some blood. "Ye see, my haun' trim'elt. I'm ane o' the lame kitties, an' the pistol skited off my broo'. But I beg your pardon," he added, correcting the dialect with evident labour, and retaining a very strong accent; "some left-handed men are as dexterous as your right-handed billies, but I'm the most sinistrous individual it has been my misfortune to meet. I think my very soul's left-handed."

"Come in here," said L'Estrange.

The man stepped in at once, and L'Estrange shut the door, at which a Temple porter knocked almost immediately.

"There's nothing wrong," said L'Estrange, as he opened the door and nodded familiarly.

The porter muttered something and withdrew;



and the voices and hurried footsteps which had resounded in the building after the discharge of the pistol, gradually died away.

With the tenderness of a woman L'Estrange bound up the man's ear; and having given him a glass of brandy, made him lie down on a couch, while he resumed his hammock.

The two men surveyed each other with interest and wonder; the one delicate, brilliant, tempered like a Damascus blade; the other coarse-grained, dusky, tough, like a scythe, or a bill-hook. When their gaze met the thought of either was, "There is something about this man that attracts me. I wonder how much we have in common?" L'Estrange was the first to speak.

"You chose a strange place to attempt suicide," he said.

"I didn't choose it," returned the other, with some special meaning.

"Did you mean to kill yourself?"

"Not exactly," was the cautious reply.

"I see," said L'Estrange, smiling; "you were just having a shot at yourself; probably you have not been long in London."

"A week."

"Oh! I should have thought you would have observed in that time that, however customary it may be in Glasgow and Edinburgh for men to chip pieces off their heads with bullets as an afternoon amusement, the game is not recognised here; it's illegal, and, in this benighted land, punishable."

"I've been long enough in London," said the other, smiling grimly, "to understand that what you've said about Glasgow and Edinburgh is a joke. I didn't quite make out that English style of joke at first, but it's so common that I begin to be able to distinguish it from lying."<sup>1</sup>

"Without a surgical operation?"

<sup>1</sup> Out of consideration for the reader, it is perhaps convenient to drop the homely Doric which the old Scot habitually used.

“Ay.”

“Are you sure you weren’t trying to make an entrance for some difficult English joke a moment ago?”

“Quite sure. It was a practical joke I was trying to get into my head; not English, but universal.”

“Death?”

The other nodded, and both sat silent for a second or two.

“Well,” said the Scotchman at last, “I’m very obliged to you, sir. I’ll go about my business now.”

“You’d better rest a little; there’s no hurry,” said L’Estrange kindly.

The Scotchman, who had risen, lay down again, and asked suddenly: “Where is Lord Tintock?”

“Lord Tintock?” echoed L’Estrange.

“Ay; Charles Mountstuart—Lord Tintock.”

“Oh! Mountstuart: I forgot he was Tintock now. I don’t know.”

"But he lives on the same floor as you, sir."

"He did until three days ago. He gave up his chambers when his father died. If he's not at Tintock I don't know where he is. I very seldom saw him, during the last three months not at all, for he rarely came to his rooms."

"He's not at Tintock."

"Do you know him?"

"I saw him once," he said carelessly. Then he added, speaking rather to himself than to L'Estrange, in a low but distinct and strangely solemn voice, "and I shall see him once again—please God."

L'Estrange looked at him intently. The Scotchman raised his eyes, and seeing the interrogation in L'Estrange's gaze, said: "I can't tell you anything about myself. I did mean to take my life, there's no use in denying it. I failed, and I won't try again. Good-bye."

Much interested, and wishing to retain him, L'Estrange said, pointing to the pistol which the

Scotchman was pocketing: "How could you expect to kill anything with that piece of anti-quity?"

"Anything will kill a man when his time comes," was the evasive answer.

"Must you go?" asked L'Estrange.

"Ay, I must," said the other.

"Shall I see you again?"

"Maybe."

"Could I see you again to-night? Come back at twelve to-night, will you?"

"Well, if nothing comes in the way, I may, sir."

"No, but make the appointment," said L'Estrange somewhat imperiously. There was a distraught look about the man, and he wished to try and save him from himself. The Scotchman's remarks had been self-contradictory, and L'Estrange did not quite trust the assurance which he had given that he would not attempt suicide again. He understood human nature—

that is, the male portion of it, well; and he felt that if this man promised to visit him at twelve, he would do so. He thought the Scot looked like one who, having failed in some enterprise, had now nothing to live for; and he judged that the proposed appointment would supply a motive quite sufficient to make his remarkable visitor desire to live a little longer; when life and death are on the balance a feather weighs. L'Estrange was mistaken, however; the Scotchman had in the meantime abandoned the idea of suicide.

"I'll come," he said with decision, after a little reflection.

"That's right," said L'Estrange. He then mentioned his name.

"They call me Angus Frazer," said the other. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye for the present," said L'Estrange.

There was much in this old man that grated on L'Estrange; and he was astonished at him.

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self when he realised that he had admitted to a certain degree of intimacy a half-educated stranger, evidently belonging to the lower orders ; but "one touch of Nature makes the whole world kin," and the powerful emotions which had led the man who had called himself Angus Frazer to attempt suicide found an echo in L'Estrange's breast. We are all a little mad in this "mad world, my masters." In spite of the veneer of civilisation on which each new age has rubbed a polish of its own, a little scratch reveals the knotty, stubborn human nature beneath that loves madly, and avenges madly, and levels all orders.





## CHAPTER II.

### A LEFT-HANDED LIFE.

THE idea of suicide has a strange fascination for the modern mind. Few men and women, whose skulls enclose anything in the shape of brains, escape the contemplation of it in relation to themselves; for if unsatisfied desire or unachieved ambition does not supply the motive, that famous foreign importation, *ennui*—the French, as a Dutch compliment to us, call it *le spleen*—is quite a sufficient incitement, not only to the contemplation, but to the commission of self-slaughter. We have all heard of the delightful and eminently foreign Englishman who hung himself one morning to avoid the daily necessity of donning and doffing his clothes. Suicide as a means of escape from the

sad array of broken columns—to vary the skeleton metaphor—the unaccomplished aims that were crowded away in his soul's inner chamber, occurred to L'Estrange occasionally; but he also believed in a kind of platonic species which he called ideal suicide. On one of his pipe lights he wrote it down thus: "The highest prayer, according to a certain philosopher, is an action; suicide—naked, bloody, practical suicide is the most heartfelt prayer possible to the uneducated, to the pagan, and to the very young; because it is the act of an optimist, a believer in this at least, that the universe is intended for man, and that there is happiness—peace to be found, somewhere, somehow, if only in annihilation. But the cultured man, the man who has seen and groped a little way into the mystery of life, knows of a higher suicide—the slaughter of the darling object of his soul, however high and noble, *because it is his*. The man who could do that would attain peace, which is happiness." Then followed some remarks about

Renunciation, and Nirvana; for L'Estrange perceived that he had simply phrased in a new way a very old idea. The reader must not regard this as the mere lazy philosophising of an idle man. L'Estrange was in earnest—dead earnest; any man who knows the world, will take as sufficient proof of that, the fact of his constant failure. What he had sought was a key, or some explanation, of the mystery of existence—which everyone seeks consciously or unconsciously. He had thought to find it in success; having failed, he began to wonder if he had not stumbled on it blindfold; to probe and test his failure to see if by any chance in the sorrow and misery of that failure there lay not the solution he sought so earnestly.

The necessity of this glimpse into L'Estrange's inner life, however tedious the reader may have found it, will now appear. Credence for what is about to follow could not have been expected, unless the speculative quality of the man's mind and the spirituality of his nature had been exhibited in some degree.

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In the first chapter it was said that no woman ever got more than a glance from L'Estrange. This is true, not only in substance but literally; and the full meaning of what is intended must be stated explicitly. Madam, you need not shut this book, or if you wish to read it, you need not keep it from your daughter—that is, if you allow your daughter to read *Enid* and *Elaine* and *Guinevere*, and to witness the performance of *Hamlet* and *Othello*. As for you, Mrs. Grundy, there is nothing to be said, except “good-bye.” We part company with you, madam, at the next sentence you will find, for it contains a statement which you, with your intimate experience of the frailty of humanity, cannot but deem absurd. Not only had Robert L'Estrange never been in love, but he had never so much as kissed any woman except his mother, from the time that women ceased kissing him, for he had been a most beautiful boy. Like Sir Galahad, he was a maiden knight, he was not of those, in the Laureate's fine-filled phrase,

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“who keep their winged affections clipped with crime.” Neither love nor lust had ever exerted any dominion over this man. “He was eight-and-thirty,” the reader says—not Mrs. Grundy, she has already closed the book, but the gentle reader—with some pardonable dubiety. True: all that can be said here, however, is to insist on your believing it. You have seen how his mental and physical energies have been devoted in the past; and an endeavour has been made to show you something of his spirituality. If you cannot credit what is here asserted of him, then you had perhaps read no further, like the lady to whom we have bidden a respectful farewell. But you will surely believe it: the world is not so black as it is painted, and even in this gross and sordid London of ours there are unspotted men to be found, as well as unspotted women. Unspotted men who are not fanatical, not pietists, but men of the world, engaged in business, or, like L'Estrange, in their own culture, or leading simply the ordinary

fashionable life. You believe this, gentle reader? Yes; for you have a soul of your own, and religions, conventionally or not, you believe in God, or you believe in man. But to the business of our tale.

When Angus Frazer left him, L'Estrange went out, revolving in his mind once more this idea of suicide which haunts the mill-girl and the princess, the cadger and the lord. But he had to dine somewhere, and in the matter of eating Robert L'Estrange was a Conservative. His soul did not hunger after flesh-pots, in the shape of mysterious Italian delicacies, or he might have dropped in at Pantaleoni's and satisfied his craving. No man finds rest in a restaurant; perhaps that was why Robert L'Estrange made up his mind to dine at the Studio Club. The Studio Club is exclusive; but if a man is a good fellow, a real good fellow, they will elect him at the Studio, if he's a worker, and if he's honest he's pretty nearly certain to get in to the very home-like establishment not a hundred miles from Hanover Square, which is opposite the

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Eastern Crematorium, where decayed Generals without livers and with tempers, China merchants, and people who have passed their time persistently pulling at the pagoda tree in some way or other, go to dream away the remainder of their existence, and to talk over old times and the depreciation in the value of the rupee. The old gentlemen at the Crematorium always speak contemptuously of the members of the Studio as the "persons who occupy the house over the way," while the Studio men refer to their opposite neighbours as the "Nautchers." No member of the Studio has ever entered the doors of the Crematorium; the reason for this is very simple. There is an unwritten law at the Crematorium Club that no person is admitted at the front door except in uniform, or wearing a tall hat. Now the Studio men, as we all know, affect eccentric head-coverings and fancy beards. It need hardly be said that a Nautcher never enters any other club but his own eastern paradise, except a service one occasionally.

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They give you a very decent dinner at the Studio. L'Estrange ate the decent dinner, and then he went into the billiard-room and listened to and joined in the talk, which was, of course, of the shop—shoppy. Wackerbath the critic was there ; in the columns of his own paper Wackerbath is a very great man indeed ; he lets everybody have it freely all round, and Apollo couldn't have flayed Marsyas with greater pleasure than Mr. Wackerbath did his artistic friends and enemies ; he slated the friends, and he rubbed Cayenne pepper into the wounds of the enemies. "I'll make 'em squirm," Mr. Wackerbath would say, as he sat down before his sheets of lined foolscap and emptied the vials of his wrath on the artistic world generally. Wackerbath had, of course, begun life as an unsuccessful artist ; no one had ever bought a picture of his ; but Wackerbath made a very good thing out of criticism. The wives, sisters and daughters of all artists were civil to Wackerbath, and smiled their sweetest



upon him ; for their husbands', brothers', or fathers' sakes. He was invited to delicate little dinners, which were offered as a sort of sacrifice to the infernal gods ; he was bowed down to, and koo-tooted to, and made much of in artistic circles ; but at the Studio Club Art was avenged ; there, nobody played up to Wackerbath, it would have been bad form.

They were playing pool. Wackerbath was just dead, he had starred you know, but all in vain ; fellows played for safety, or they played for lives, but whenever they had a chance they took a mean advantage of Wackerbath ; they would plant him over a pocket if they got the opportunity they would cannon him in ; and when Wackerbath died, a great shout of delight resounded through the billiard-room.

"I'm awfully sorry, old fellow," said young M'Gilp, "these things will happen, you know."

"They're always happening here," said Wackerbath, who was very red in the face. "I call it

a most ungentlemanly thing. I wish artists would try to be gentlemen."

"Some gentlemen are sorry they've tried to be artists," retorted M'Gilp.

And then the man whose last life had been taken seated himself at L'Estrange's side, yearning for sympathy. "It was precious hard lines, wasn't it?" he said.

"It always is hard lines," remarked L'Estrange. "You remember the Japanese definition of the game; two men walk round a table with sticks, one swears, and the other says, 'Hard lines.'"

"It isn't the being put down, sir," said Wackerbath, "that I object to; it's the paltry, revengeful spirit of these men that makes my gorge rise; they've had half-a-crown out of me, sir, by a foul conspiracy. Look at those five men, sir," said Wackerbath in a hoarse whisper, "they're still chuckling over the success of their own villainy. We are both literary men, L'Estrange; *you* can understand what these fellows can never

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comprehend. I have to sit in judgment on these men; I love them, sir; that is to say most of them, as brothers; but, sir, I cannot hesitate to do my duty to the public, and to the journal from which I draw an annual screw. There's M'Gilp, as nice a young fellow as you'd meet in a day's march, but his drawing's faulty, his composition's defective, and there's a want of luminosity about his aerial perspective. It is my duty to put the British public and the British picture-buyer on their guard against a man like that. And shall I hesitate, L'Estrange? I don't mind telling you, in the strictest confidence, that I shall not hesitate. I need hardly say that a deficiency in the luminosity of his aerial perspective is a capital offence in an artist; the man who sins in that direction, sir, is worthy of artistic death. And then he errs, too, in matter of detail; that man, sir, has had the audacity to paint a farm-yard with a girl feeding Dorking fowls; they *are* Dorkings, sir, unmistakable Dork-

ings, and they've only four claws. He might just as well paint a man with four toes instead of five. I mean to bring it home to him, sir. I shall *not* flinch. Then there's Bagge. Between you and me and the post, sir, that man hasn't a single original idea. And yet that man is an R.A.; it is not my fault that Bagge is an R.A. I have warned the public for years against Bagge; there isn't an academician that I haven't spoken my mind to very freely upon the subject of Bagge. He's only showing one picture, sir, this year; *that's* his swagger. The other men exhibit the full number, of course they do. Bagge has sold his picture already for four figures, the villain. He's stolen the sky from one of the National Gallery Claude's; the nondescript tree in the foreground, the thing with the trunk of a beech and the leaves of a willow, which the public will admire, because Bagge's the fashion, and an R.A. forsooth, he's cribbed from the big Ruysdael. I caught his daughter, Jane, copying it."

At that moment, one of the players fluked Bagge, R.A., into the middle pocket.

"Good stroke, sir, good stroke indeed," cried Mr. Wackerbath, drumming with the butt of his cue upon the floor.

And then Bagge, R.A., glared fiercely at Mr. Wackerbath, and Wackerbath blew out his cheeks in derision.

"I'm sorry for Bagge," said Wackerbath, "awfully sorry for him, poor fellow, because he has a large family of girls; but I shall unmask him, sir, I shall unmask him without mercy. Duty before everything is my principle, L'Estrange."

And Robert L'Estrange sat in the billiard-room of the Studio and listened to the artistic "shop," and I am bound to say enjoyed himself. And then he took his leave and marched off down Regent Street, and so to the Strand, resolved to finish his evening at the Convivial Cannibals.

Two men were talking in whispers in one corner of the great smoke-room, and arranging

the plot of a piece they were about to write in collaboration. Mr. Jumps, the low comedian, was fast asleep in a large easy-chair, a copy of the "Era" upon his lap. M'Turk, Screamer, and Blowhard, political leader-writers, sat peacefully side by side meditating their midnight philippics for the morning journals. Then a crowd of men streamed into the room within the next ten minutes, men who had been to the play, not for pleasure, but because they were paid to go. Then everybody began to talk at the full pitch of his voice and compare notes upon the romantic melodrama that had been brought out that evening.

"It's bound to catch on," cried Deadwig, "it's bound to catch on, because it's so devilish original. Cribbe's nothing if he isn't original, and the thing's magnificently staged; besides, there's a lot of poetry about it."

"I don't think much of his poetry; most of it is adapted from "Familiar Quotations;" what-

ever's good isn't original, and what's original ain't either good, or poetry," said Mr. Mummery of the "Evening Flasher," as he ordered a sixpenny Muria and an Irish whisky.

"It's all one to Cribbe," remarked another man, "they're bound to take his stuff for the next two years under their agreement. Cribbe was original enough once, but that was when he wrote dramas for the 'Bird of Prey.' A fellow can't go on being original all his days. It's in low life that Cribbe shines, he understands *that*; and when he wants poetry he just goes to Starveling and buys it by the yard; and we all know where Starveling gets his poetry from."

"A combination of Walker's rhyming dictionary and three star Henessey, I should think," remarked another man.

"Well, he gives the B.P. what it wants, at any rate," cried Mr. Deadwig; "and so long as they turn money away at the doors for ten months in the year at the Peristyle, they'll go on with

Cribbe: and when Cribbe don't draw they'll go back to Flesher and lime-light effects."

"Here's the Popular Educator," cried a voice, as a slight, delicate-looking man, with restless, sparkling eyes, and a nervous, irritable manner, made his appearance, a large book under his arm. The book was Webster's "English Dictionary." The little man took his seat in the middle of a large settee, and placed the dictionary on a small table in front of him. He was immediately surrounded by some dozen Cannibals, who gazed at him with respectful attention.

"G," said the little man.

"A," said his next-door neighbour.

"G," said Mr. Jumps, the low comedian, who was now wide awake, with a sort of ecstatic smile.

"You're always thinking of 'em, Jumps," remarked the little man with the restless eyes; "gag is a word, and costs you a penny."

Mr. Jumps sighed deeply and placed a penny upon the table. "J," he remarked very briskly.



"E," said the next man without hesitation.

"J," said Mr. Mummery, spitefully, and with a superior smile.

"U," burst forth his next-door neighbour looking fixedly at the ceiling.

"J—E—J—U, that's kid," remarked Mr. Blowhard, who sat next him, "there ain't no such person, and I challenge."

"Then you fork out twopence, Blowhard," remarked the little man.

"Word, word," shouted everybody in chorus.

"Jejune," explained the Popular Educator, "as Blowhard's readers know, if he doesn't; it means vacuous, empty, dry, or barren. Try and look pleasant, my Blowhard, and give a letter."

And so the spelling-bee went on, and at the end of about twenty minutes there was quite a pile of coppers in front of the Popular Educator.

"You can order fourpenny drinks, my boys," he said with a pleased smile.

“I’m hanged if this drink hasn’t cost me sevenpence,” said Mr. Blowhard indignantly.

“That’s because you’re not an educated person,” cried Mr. Mummery consolingly.

At that moment, Mr. Mugger, the popular favourite, entered the room; the hero of a thousand farces thrust his head in first and made a hideous grimace; he was accustomed to do this upon the stage, and he retained the habit in private life.

“Oh, lor,” cried Mr. Jumps, “here’s Mugger, just as we were all so comfortable. Mugger without his make up is absolutely unbearable; a very little of him goes a long way, don’t it, L’Estrange?” continued Mr. Jumps.

And then quite unconsciously Mr. Jumps became suddenly afflicted with a tremendous double squint; the left hand corner of his mouth was drawn towards his ear, while what doctors call his hairy scalp began to twitch violently as though it were being pulled by a string: he appeared to be attacked with face-ache, first on the right cheek,

and then on the left : then he made a sudden loud popping noise with his lips, which sounded like the opening of a soda-water bottle, nodded to L'Estrange and hurried from the room.

It's a very curious fact that there isn't a room in London big enough to hold Jumps and Mugger at the same time, perhaps it's just as well ; one low comedian is enough for most men, and we all know that enough is as good as a feast.

After about three quarters of an hour of Mugger, his imitations, his stories in three different voices, and his professional experiences, it will not perhaps be wondered at that Robert L'Estrange fell asleep. When he awoke, nigh on midnight, the spelling-bee was still continuing, Mugger was still telling comic stories, and Robert L'Estrange, feeling that he had "an exposition of sleep come upon him," started off for his rooms in the Temple.

Punctually at twelve o'clock Angus Frazer appeared in L'Estrange's room, and the two men resumed their positions of the afternoon—L'Estrange

in his hammock, and Angus on the couch. L'Estrange, always studying the men he met, had a habit in conversation of allowing his companion, whoever he might be, to break the silences when they occurred ; he had an idea, and a shrewd one too, that character peeps out very strongly in the first utterance, and in the remark of him who resumes a conversation when it has been interrupted.

"It's an unchancy thing to be left-handed," said Angus.

"Have you found it so ?" asked L'Estrange.

"I have. Nobody but a left-handed man can conceive the misfortune of it. You see the world in general is accustomed to deal with right-handed people, and it holds out its prizes to that side. While your sinister man, like me, is stretching his hand across his body, a dozen dexter chaps grab everything. My father was kitty ; it's hereditary ; it's an awful thing that heredity. I'm not saying it's wrong that the bairns should suffer for the sins

of their fathers. No; I'm thinking it's a good law, and the world would be a better world, if it was recognised by Parliament; but—"

"Stop now," interrupted L'Estrange, amused and interested. "How could Parliament recognise it?"

"Well, that's no for me tae say; but I'm thinkin' it micht resolve itsel' intae a kin' o' matrimonial committee, and dae somethin' towards stampin' oot hereditary diseases an' improvin' the breed o' men. But I forgot; you'll not be understanding me: I can speak English well enough. As I was saying heredity is a terrible thing, and sometimes unjust. Suppose a man's ancestor got his right arm shot off at the battle of Drumclog when he was a halflin—what do you call it?<sup>1</sup> hobbledehoy, half-man half-boy—and had to employ his left; and suppose his son, half by inheritance and half by imitation of his father, became a kitty; and his son, and his son's son, and so on down to me. Is it not unjust? Mark you, it's not a mere difference of tweedle-dum

<sup>1</sup> *Pace*, Mr. Thackeray who spells the word differently.

with this thumb, or tweedle-dee with that. It means that a man's whole life is left-handed, that he has a left-handed soul; and I sometimes think it means that he'll find himself on the left-hand on the Judgment Day—that's a gruesome thoct!"

"But don't you see that while it was no sin in your ancestor to lose his arm at Drumclog, it was reprehensible in him not to educate his son to use his right hand; and a sin of omission apparently in all your forefathers?"

"Ay!" said Angus, "ay, man! I never looked at it that way."

"What do you mean by having a left-hand life?" asked L'Estrange.

"Well," said Angus, "if you really want to know, an example would be the best explanation."

"I do want to know."

L'Estrange was in one of those sympathetic moods which his more intimate acquaintances—few and not very intimate at the best—found so seductive. There were one or two hard-headed,

iron-nerved men of affairs who always looked back with amazement to an occasion when "that curious chap L'Estrange sat with me for an hour or two; and, by Jove! before I knew where I was I had told him all my life, sir. Most remarkable man! He said hardly anything, yet I couldn't help myself, and was quite glad to tell him—things, too, that I haven't dared to tell myself since."

"I really don't know," said Angus Frazer, evidently under the subtle spell of L'Estrange's sympathy, "why I should be talking to you in this way. I feel as if I wanted to tell you all about myself; but I won't; I'll tell you about another kitty I knew. He was called—eh—James Wask. It was inherited in his case too; and he was a postman. His father had been a postman before him, and had given him a very fair education—even postmen are educated in Scotland—but, you see, his mind was left-handed, and he could never do a sum right, or spell a word of three syllables correctly, except at the second

attempt. His father got him into the post-office, in the little town in Perthshire where they lived, as a clerk. They suffered his sinister penmanship and blotted accounts for a week, and then gave him a letter-bag. A postman's is one of the few jobs that suits a kitty. The heaviest part of his manual labour falls on his left hand, you see. Every postman is left-handed so far as his occupation goes; he grasps the bundle with his left hand and delivers with his right. Then it suits a man whose mind's left-handed, too, because, you see, he can take whichever side of the street he likes first. Well, I made a good enough postman."

Neither Angus nor his auditor noticed the change to the first person. L'Estrange knew from the start that it was himself the Scotchman talked of; and the latter, looking in L'Estrange's face as he told his story, forgot the little *ruse* with which he had begun, so glad was he to talk about himself, and so confident was he of the sympathy and loyalty of his confessor.



“I fell in love with a ploughman’s daughter. Man, but she was a bonny, blue-eyed girl. And so did a baker’s vanman. The ploughman’s daughter loved the vanman, but he jilted her, and she married me. She kept me very miserable for two years ; and then just when she was beginning to be gentle and kind, for I was very patient with her, she died. She left a daughter, who grew up to be a great beauty, like her mother—heredity again. I managed to give her a good education. And when she was seventeen she could play and sing, and talk fine English with any lady in the land. She had been a kitty as a little girl ; her teachers managed, however, to train her out of it, so far as her hands went, but they had no effect on her mind, or her life. She was left-minded, left-fortuned, left-fated. She inherited all that was sinister in me, and all that was bad in her mother. Ill-tempered, dishonest, ambitious, and, worst of all, lovely, she fell a prey to a lord’s son in the neighbourhood—that very Charles Mount-

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stuart, now Lord Tintock. I don't think any man ever loved his daughter in the same way that I did. There wasn't a fault she had that I didn't know and love her better for; I used to think that I understood how God loved this sinful world better than He loved the angels, just because it was sinful. When she came home, disgraced, and more ill-tempered and harsh to me than before, I loved her better than ever. She had a baby, and the change began in her, that had begun in her mother. She grew gentle and tender, and I used never to tire of watching her and the little one. I didn't bother then about the illegitimacy o' the bairn at all. We were a left-fated family, you see; it was our lot, and we had just to thole it. As my daughter grew sweeter, and lovelier, and kinder, I watched her fearfully; and it happened just as I dreaded. Both she and her bairn died a month or two after it was born. Then I found that my poor left-handed life was of no use to me; there was nothing even for me to live for. I got to

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brooding about Mountstuart; but I staved off the thought that came to me, by saying it wasn't his fault. He couldn't help my daughter's hereditary left-souledness. It was my fault for marrying at all, and for choosing a wife with such an unfortunate disposition. But you'd wonder at the things that'll happen to a left-headed man. That old pistol you laughed at in the afternoon hung above the chimney. It was the pistol used by my ancestor at the battle of Drumclog, for we come of an old family, that were once lairds of the very lands that Tintock owns now. It had been loaded, nobody knows how long, and I used to sit at night glowering at it. Eight days ago I had looked at it for such a time that I fell into a kind of trance. In stepped my daughter, my own daughter, Maggie. She had on a white, glistening dress, and her golden hair came down past her waist in a waving, rippling cloud. She looked at me, and she was so bonny that I began to sob—I had to; but she sang over some music, a melody not of this

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world, and it made my whole body shiver with delight. Then she stepped to the ingle and lifted down the old horse-pistol, or I thought she did, and gave it to me; then she kissed me. As she vanished I saw what I hadn't noticed at first, I was just so happy to see my own lassie again. She had her wee bit bonnie bairn lying in her bosom, smiling and crowing quietly; and it minded me of an old Scotch ballad that ye'll maybe have heard of, where it tells about 'the young mither wi' her bairnie in her airms.' I sat for hours with that pistol, wondering what I was to do. At last I understood clearly what was meant. I was to try and shoot Mountstuart with it. It seemed to me that there was a kind of divinity about the idea. If this old frail weapon, with a charge in it, perhaps for a hundred years, should kill the man who had betrayed my daughter, then he had been most to blame; if it failed to kill him, then the fault was mine in marrying and begetting a daughter, knowing well my own left-handedness. Here you

see was something to live for. I started for London at once to find out Mountstuart. To give the man a still better chance than the old pistol gave him, I didn't hurry in my search. Then his father died, just when I discovered his whereabouts, and he became Lord Tintock. After three days, that is, this morning, remembering what a bad son he had been, I thought it might be a good thing to send him after his father. When I came here he was gone. A curious desire came over me to see if the pistol would really go off; and it also occurred to me that if I killed myself, then Tintock couldn't die by my hand, but if I didn't, then it was foreordained that I was to be his executioner."

Angus here took out his pistol from his pocket, and handed it to L'Estrange.

"There; keep that; lock it away somewhere. That gives Tintock another chance, for if I had that in my possession I should certainly load it again, and use it. Now I must find out another

way of killing him—I mean another way of killing him must be suggested to me by something outside of me, before I lay hands on him.”

L'Estrange locked up the pistol in his desk, and then for several minutes the two men sat and looked at each other in silence.

## CHAPTER III.

ENTER LORD TINTOCK.

"WELL," said Angus, rising at last, "I must go now."

"Where too?" asked L'Estrange pointedly.

"I don't know," Angus replied, not without some consideration.

"You say that," returned L'Estrange, "as if you were suddenly confronted with a subject, an abtruse subject, for the first time."

"It's very abstruse," said Angus, scratching his head, and smiling rather shamefacedly.

"Is it that your money's done?" asked L'Estrange gently.

"I'm thinking so."

L'Estrange laughed inwardly at the ambiguity of

the answer. Liberal-minded as he was, he shared the common English idea that the average Scot excels the rest of mankind in caution and indirectness, when money is in question.

"You'll come and have some supper with me," he said.

"I don't see anything to hinder; I'll be very glad, sir."

"Where are you going to sleep to-night?"

As Angus seemed to be inventing a reply, L'Estrange did not allow him to answer.

"Look here, my poor fellow," he said. "You've no lodging, and you've had very little to eat to-day, and your money's done. What are you going to do?"

Again it was evident that the reply would be far from the truth.

"I think you don't know very well what you're going to do," said L'Estrange, before Angus's answer was under weigh: "so I'll tell you. After supping with me you're going to sleep on that



couch, and in the morning we'll lay our heads together and devise something."

"You're certain that I'll not be incommoding you," said Angus.

"Oh yes, you'll be incommoding me if that'll be any satisfaction to you," returned L'Estrange in a manner peculiar to himself, which contradicted his words. "Come along."

Although Angus Frazer was sixty years old, he carried all his height. He was almost as tall as L'Estrange, and they made a very remarkable couple as they entered the international hall of the Café Cosmopolite. L'Estrange went there not on account of the *cuisine*, but for the sake of the crowd, which was the biggest assemblage of eaters to be found at that time of night in London: he wished to watch its effects upon his companion.

"Ay, man," said Angus, as he sat down, "there's a crowd of folk here." But he betrayed no awkwardness; above all there was no pretence; he looked with interest and wonder at whatever

interested and astonished him, but appeared to consider himself quite on a level with his surroundings. L'Estrange couldn't help thinking of Burns's patent of nobility direct from the hand of an Almighty God; at the same time he remembered that this old Scotchman, however lowly a position he occupied, could trace his decent even further back than his grandfather.

L'Estrange pecked a little to keep Angus company, and when the particularly effectual edge of his guest's appetite seemed to be turned a little, contrary to his habit, he started conversation with the jocular remark, "Well, Mr. Frazer, there's nothing left-handed about your appetite."

"Is there not?" said Angus. "You're but young yet, Mr. L'Estrange, in the diagnosis of left-handedness. Could anything be more sinister than for a man, appetited like me, with tastes that most people need to acquire, to be bred a country postman? For forty years I walked sixteen miles every day, that's two or three times round the

world I'm thinking. Can you imagine the effect of sixteen miles of frost and snow on my appetite? Man, I was often sick with hunger. The visions, ay, and the sniffs that I had (with the north-east lashing my face with sleet), of roasts and fries, and puddings, would have done honour to the Barne-cide's guest. And to come home to pease-brose and sourmilk, or a drop cold porridge with treacle and water! I'm thinking my appetite's the most left-handed thing about me." But there was no regret for his hard life in the laughter that accompanied his complaint.

"What were you going to do to-night, my friend?" asked L'Estrange. "Tell me honestly," he added. "I know quite well that your money's all gone."

"My money *is* all gone. I spent the last two shillings I had in getting my ear plastered—your bandage came off, but it was a good bandage. I was due my landlady for the week six shillings. I thought my bag and its contents would pay for

that, so I determined not to go back to my lodgings, and just let the landlady make what she could of my few belongings. I meant to live in Chambers, at a shilling, or ninepence, or sixpence a night, according as I could afford it. And for money I had this watch to pawn."

He took from his pocket a choice specimen of the taste in chronometers of our ancestors; a thing about the size of a small frying-pan with a tick like a Nasmyth steam-hammer, or perhaps not quite so loud.

"I asked thirty shillings for this, and they offered me five. I didn't understand it, and I don't understand it. It's a good watch, never goes wrong, and belonged to my grandfather. I went to another pawn-office, and thinking that perhaps I hadn't asked enough before, and that the man in consequence had imagined I didn't mean to redeem it, I said I would take two-pounds-ten. The shopman replied that he didn't doubt it, and he would give me half-a-crown on account,

and when somebody had paid me for carting away a dozen more such warming-pans, he would advance me the rest of the money on 'em. I was astonished. You see, I had never pawned anything before, and knew nothing about it. 'Perhaps you think I've stolen it,' I said; 'but I haven't. It's my own property, and belonged to my grandfather.' 'Did it?' said the young man, looking astonished; 'I would have thought now that it must have been the property of the great MacSandy that had a boat of his own in Noah's time.' Then I saw that the young man was trying to make a fool of me, because I hailed from benorth the Tweed, so I gave him three mouthfuls of broad Scotch, and that frightened him. He slunk back from the counter, and stammered out that he would give me three-and-ninepence, but I wouldn't have it, and came away. Then there was my hat; it belonged to my father."

He took up his beaver, a true chimney-pot, and caressed it.

"I couldn't think of doing without that," he said. "So I offered in another place this coat, my best one, my only one now. It was my father's too. It's magnificent stuff, and there's any amount of cloth in it. It's—"

He got no further in the narration of his adventures with the pawn-brokers. His knife and fork fell from his hands, and he rose, resting his palms on the table.

L'Estrange followed his gaze, and saw Lord Tintock.

The whole expression of Angus Frazer's face changed, and his form dilated, as he raised himself to his full height and looked across at the young lord. A deep flush overspread his cheeks; his eyes looked as if they would be consumed by the fire of wrath that burned in them; and he shut and opened his hands convulsively.

"Sit down, you fool," said L'Estrange, rising and laying his hand on the old man's shoulder.

With his eyes fixed on his enemy, Frazer re-

sumed his seat. L'Estrange thought it best to make him talk ; he might work off the murderous impulse in invective.

"No one would think that that pretty fellow was such a villain," said L'Estrange.

As a rule, Angus Frazer's excitement found vent in broad Scotch. On the present occasion he seemed to aid L'Estrange's purpose in making him talk by constraining himself to speak in English.

"No," he said, turning to L'Estrange, but keeping his eyes fixed on Lord Tintock. Very slowly, and under his breath, he went on. "He has a woman's face, with a soft mouth and sweet, blue eyes ; you wouldn't think he was such a villain. His father has only been three days dead ; he didn't go to his funeral. His mother is in Scotland ; she has no other children ; she hasn't seen him for nearly a year ; she weeps and prays ; and he is here. Look at his complexion ; it's like a peach. Look at his eyes, how lustrous they are. How

compact and strong, how healthy he is. Curse him! You wouldn't think he was such a villain. He takes more care of his health than any woman. His debaucheries are part of his—what's the word—*régime*. He wouldn't spoil his blood, not to be made a duke, not for a million a year. It's his art to keep it sweet and strong. He lives on the broken hearts of girls and fathers and mothers. You wouldn't think he was a villain; no. He's over thirty, yet his face is like a boy's—not a wrinkle. Grief and care must not come near him; he diets his mind as well as his body."

He stopped and clutched his knife. A lady, wearing a heavy black lace fall, which effectually concealed her features, had entered the great room and sat down beside Lord Tintock. After a short pause, during which he fumbled with his knife feverishly, the old man resumed his monologue; he felt it to be a safety-valve.

"That's one of his victims, I'm thinking. She wants mercy of some kind. See, she pleads. He



turns a deaf ear ; he laughs in her face. She pleads again. It annoys him ; and my lord must not be annoyed. One minute's annoyance every day for six years will make a wrinkle in the brow. My lord's brow must not be wrinkled, no matter how many hearts are lacerated. The lady knows my lord well—she has cause, poor thing, not a doubt of it. She pleads again, warmly, passionately ; for she knows my lord detests importunity. She has gained her point. What is that he writes ? Is it a cheque ? No matter ; she has it. Good ; she says something stinging, and my lord *is* annoyed in spite of himself. Now, she sips a little wine ; now she goes. She walks well ; I warrant she's beautiful. My lord is alone ; he meditates, smiles, lights a cigarette, and forgets—forgets ! The things my lord forgets that others remember ! Look at his face ; it's like a saint's. He looks this way ; he doesn't know me—I don't think he ever saw me. He nods to you. My God ! he's coming over."

“Be a man, Angus Frazer. Say nothing; read that newspaper.”

“Good evening. A curious place to meet you, L'Estrange.” Tintock's voice is low and musical.

“Yes; and what about you?”

“Oh, I had an appointment. Didn't you see the lady?”

L'Estrange nodded.

“Curious creatures, women. That one insisted on seeing me: and I gave her this place as a *rendezvous*. It's safest to see an old flame in a public place. What do you think she wanted? An invitation to the Sixteenth Century Garden-party. She wheedled it out of me, too. Damme, they always do wheedle it out of you. Shall you be there?”

“Very likely.”

“Good-night, L'Estrange.”

L'Estrange had been watching Frazer. He determined on a bold remedy; it would either kill or cure.

“Don’t go yet,” he said. “Here’s a friend of mine from your part of the world. Mr. Angus Frazer—Lord Tintock.”

Frazer rose, pale and trembling, face to face at last with his enemy.

“Frazer,” muttered Tintock. His eyes shifted uneasily from L’Estrange to Angus. Then he bowed frigidly, and turned to go.

“Sit down, Charles Mountstuart,” said Frazer in an intense whisper.

Lord Tintock moved a step away, and hesitated.

“Sit down, Charles Mountstuart, or I’ll disgrace you.”

Frazer lifted his wine glass ready to throw it; but Lord Tintock sat down. He was very miserable. The meaning of the alternative was so plain in the old man’s voice and eye that he shrunk together in the wretchedness of his position. After he had seated himself, he half rose: a brief scene would have less misery for him than the old man’s upbraidings, but a glance at Frazer’s face convinced

him that there would be more than a mere scene ; so he sat still—it wasn't cowardice—Lord Tintock was no coward, but he did hate to be annoyed ; besides, he had never had an experience of the kind before, and he was altogether at a loss.

“ Charles Mountstuart,” began Angus, and Lord Tintock, in spite of himself, felt like a criminal arraigned at the bar of justice. “ Charles Mountstuart—Charles Mountstuart ”—there was a lump in the old man's throat. He glanced rapidly from side to side, a fierce glance, as if he were looking down something, shook back his hair and began again in a less agitated tone. “ Charles Mountstuart, I have very little to say. I came to London to kill you. When I found you had left your chambers at Lincoln's Inn, I was glad, my lord. I would have killed you, had I found you. I thought Providence meant to shield you. To make sure, my lord, I tried to shoot myself, but it was not to be. So I don't know whether it's fore-ordained that I'm to kill you or not. My daughter

and her wee bairn are dead, my lord. Take this warning : keep out of my way—keep out of my way. That's all."

There was no help for it. Lord Tintock had to leave without a word. He had hardly gone when Frazer turned to L'Estrange and said with an effort—the purpose of the question, namely to change the subject, was evident—but quietly and with a curious smile, "What is this Sixteenth Century Garden-party?"

"Have you never heard of the Sixteenth Century Club?"

"No."

"I'll tell you about it," said L'Estrange, glad of the diversion. "It was founded about six years ago—but surely you must have heard of it?"

"No, I assure you; I never read the papers; and Burns, the Bible and Shakespeare—Burns first, I ought to be sorry to confess, make up my library."

“Well, you’ve at least heard of the late Duke of London?”

“Yes, I think so. He was the last of his line, wasn’t he, and died just about half-a-dozen years ago?”

“Right. His will was a very curious production. He complained in it of the advance of democracy and the levelling tendencies of the age, and bequeathed his great house and garden and his million of money to six peers, as trustees, with a constitution and bye-laws for the Sixteenth Century Club. No one can belong to it who cannot show an indisputable genealogy as far back as 1550. The club can do what it likes with its income, but it mustn’t touch the capital. In order that there might be an inducement for all who are eligible to join, the property belongs to the club, on the tontine principle; that cuts, of course, two ways; everybody who has any kind of claim is anxious to join, and those who are in are anxious to keep

the numbers as limited as possible; the result being that it is, so far as blood goes, the most select club in Europe."

"I wonder if I would be eligible," said Angus. "Fifteen fifty? I'm afraid not. Are you a member?"

"No, my genealogy sticks at fifteen fifty-five. The club gives a number of entertainments every year; and the first garden party is this week. Men and women sell their souls for invitations. To be a guest of the Sixteenth Century Club is to be hall-marked. So you can understand why this damsel was so importunate."

"It's a strange world," said Angus.

"It's a stupid world," said L'Estrange, suppressing a yawn. "But if we sit here any longer we'll begin to get maudlin."





## CHAPTER IV.

### BORN IN NETHER-BOHEMIA.

CECIL DALE was a gentleman, a gentleman by education, a gentleman by birth, but not, alas! a gentleman in his tastes. Eton, Oxford, society, a *dilettante* taste, a craving for association with Bohemians of both sexes, and the reputation of being a jolly good fellow had been the ruin of Cecil Dale. Bohemians of both sexes, as a rule, mean by a jolly good fellow a person who will lend them money, and be good fellow enough never afterwards to allude to the loan, or request its repayment, for fear of hurting their feelings. I'm quite sure there's more real pleasure in lending money to one's personal friend, who, though he may have a decent coat to his back, is hard

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up, deliberately and calmly knowing that you will never see that money again, than in writing a cheque for the Society for the conversion of Kramikoko, King of the Kukulokos, and his like. The one form of charity you see is spontaneous, you like your friend and you lend him the money, but you don't care a button for Kramikoko, and the money that you *invest* in attempting to purchase salvation through the conversion of Kramikoko is probably thrown away. You see a good deal of the money is swallowed up in office expenses, salaries, pensions, etc.; say nine-tenths of it, to be well within the mark. The missionary's children have to be fed and clothed and educated out of it, and his continual leaves of absence on full pay at the society's expense have to be provided for, so that not much out of your original donation actually remains for the conversion of King Kramikoko. Besides, loans to friends, which you don't expect to be repaid and never mean to ask for, are real charity; there's no subscription

list, the borrower will never reveal your name to your mutual friends, and Cecil Dale earned his title of good fellow by this kind of charity. His was an *obliging* disposition. Six thousand five hundred doesn't take very long to get rid of, lock stock and barrel, if you go the right way about it. Dale wasn't a gambler, he wasn't a horsy man; for him the Stock Exchange had no attractions, but he was of an obliging disposition, and fond of "Shakespeare and the musical glasses." He ran a theatre; two years finished his money. In those two years, in addition to having got rid of his money and earned the proud privilege of being slapped on the back by innumerable gentlemen with haggard faces, blue chins, and hoarse voices, Cecil Dale had acquired a taste for drink. His entire income now consisted of two hundred and fifty pounds a year, which was doled out to him by direction of an uncle. Having got rid of his money, he proceeded to blight his prospects.

Laura Rivers was born in Vinegar Yard,

Drury Lane. She came of a family of pantomimists; she had absolutely no education, but, at the age of seventeen, she was the loveliest girl upon the British stage, and she was just as lovely "off," mind you, as she was "on." There was nothing against Laura Rivers; she loved her—ahem!—profession, and she stuck to it, till she danced like an angel; the British public said she danced like an angel, and the British public ought to know; and Monsieur Pasdebasque said she was the best pupil he had ever had, and you don't often see a girl of seventeen playing Columbine at Old Drury. Talk of the poetry of motion—but we are not going to inflict that sort of thing on you—it is sufficient to say that that good fellow, Cecil Dale, having got through his money, and being possessed of two hundred and fifty pounds a year and a taste for strong liquors, married Laura Rivers, took her off the stage—he wasn't the sort of man to try and live on his wife's earnings—and retired to cheap lodgings at

Margate to—well, to “eat his leek.” At first they were very happy, Cecil Dale and that pretty wife of his. It didn’t seem a bit strange to Mrs. Dale that her husband drank more than was good for him; her friends and relatives in Vinegar Yard, whenever they could get it, always drank more than was good for them. Was not Cecil Dale a “swell,” and wasn’t it the experience of the Vinegar-yarders that swells always drank more than was good for them? Then their daughter, the little Sophie, was born, and very soon after Mrs. Dale became an invalid. Up to the time of her marriage, Laura Rivers had led the life of a professional athlete; for four or six hours a day that beautiful body of hers had been carefully trained and developed under the fostering care of Monsieur Pasdebasque and his talented assistants. From the moment Laura Rivers married she ceased to take any exercise whatever; within four years of her marriage, what had once been pretty Laura Rivers had disappeared, and the

mountain of flesh which was known as Mrs. Dale began to terrify her husband, the inhabitants of Margate, and herself. She ate a great deal, she slept a great deal, and she never left her arm-chair, except to go to bed. She never opened a book, she couldn't even read, poor woman; and the poetry altogether disappeared; and every night of his life Cecil Dale went drunk to bed. For fifteen years Mrs. Dale dozed in her easy-chair, and the little Sophie, her daughter, sat and read to her aloud, "The London Journal," "Reynolds's Miscellany," and "The Era."

Poor child, she hadn't had much chance. Strange to say, she spoke the Queen's English, although her little head was stuffed full of romantic nonsense, and she led a dog's life. She walked about in ragged clothes, which she was too ignorant to mend: her shoes were ever down at heel, and clattered as she ran. And then Mrs. Dale died: and when the funeral was over, Dale, who had married her for love, sat down and announced his

wife's death in a letter to his uncle, and he mourned his inability to educate his daughter as her great uncle would naturally desire. The uncle wrote back very shortly indeed: he was a wealthy man.

“I am not going to give any more money to a nephew who has disgraced himself by a low marriage. As for you, Cecil Dale, you're beyond help. It may be some small consolation to you to know that, subject to good behaviour, I shall continue your allowance. In consideration of the dreadful position of your daughter, I will give her the education of a gentlewoman, that is to say, I will pay for her schooling and her clothes. If you take her to Mr. Pargiter, my solicitor, and hand her over to him, he will return her to you properly educated at the end of three years. Let me caution you against forming any absurd hopes as to the disposal of my property. I merely do this thing to save my great-niece from the workhouse, or the streets. In the event of your death the two hundred and fifty

pounds a year will be secured to your daughter during her lifetime."

It is easily seen, from the above letter, the sort of terms that Cecil Dale and his uncle were upon. Dale was very glad indeed to get rid of the ill-dressed child for whom he felt no affection whatever. "It'll make all the difference in the world to her to be decently brought up," he thought, "and perhaps the old man may do something for her, if he takes a fancy to her, after all."

Sophie Dale was educated at Miss Worleybone's establishment at Clapham; that lady's terms were very high. Wealthy girls only were sent to Miss Worleybone's establishment; most of them came from the North; they got rid of their accent, they received a thoroughly good middle-class education. Miss Worleybone took a great deal of trouble with her girls, individually and collectively; they were pruned, carefully watered, cut back when required, potted, and repotted, and disbudded when necessary, like geraniums; and at the end of, say



seven years, they were returned to their parents in a prime condition that did the highest credit to Miss Worleybone and her system.

Sophie Dale learned to dress herself like a lady, to play, to sing, to dance : she obtained a smattering of all the 'ologies, and committed long portions of the poems of Mrs. Hemans and of Mrs Barbauld to memory. She was instructed in the Church Catechism and the faith and duty of a Christian ; and she was taught to darn her own stockings, and initiated into the art and mystery of plain needlework. If Sophie Dale could only have gone through the entire seven years' course, which Miss Worleybone provided for her pupils, the process of breaking to harness would doubtless have been carried out in a thoroughly satisfactory manner ; but she was fifteen when she went to Clapham, and no girl was ever retained after the age of eighteen at St. Catherine's College. In her three years she had acquired the manners and appearance of a lady, in addition to this she was endowed

with the delicate blonde beauty of her mother, the dancer, which had so delighted the British public, and which had caught the eye of her father, Cecil Dale, the sot, the man who had once been a gentleman.

Three days before Sophie Dale attained her eighteenth birthday, her father died of *delirium tremens* at his Margate lodging. Within the week Miss Dale's stay at St. Catherine's College came to an end, and Mr. Pargiter, her great-uncle's solicitor, personally escorted her down to Belcaster and placed her in the hands of a highly respectable clergyman, her father's half-brother, who had recently been promoted to the Deanery of the Cathedral city of Belcaster.

The dean of Belcaster was delighted to receive Sophie Dale and her two hundred and fifty pounds a year; and the rest of the history, and the ultimate fate of this young lady, whom the reader is earnestly entreated not to look upon as a heroine, will be narrated in due course.

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There are some women, just as there are some men, for whom it would have been far better if they had never been born; who, as it were, are predestined from the very outset to early shipwreck and certain destruction. Sophie Dale was one of these unfortunates; and everyone of us can point out, or, at all events, remember, one or more such beings; whose existence, to the ordinary mind, at least, is an absolute misfortune to themselves and the rest of the world. Such people inevitably go under sooner or later generally sooner.



## CHAPTER V.

### THE GARDEN-PARTY.

NEXT day a remarkable relation was tacitly established between Robert L'Estrange and Angus Frazer.

In a most unobtrusive way Angus assumed the duties of house-keeper and body-servant. The chivalrous spirit in which he performed the most menial offices, changed them into rites—nay, privileges—motive is everything in matters of this kind, and Angus was influenced by the truest gratitude to L'Estrange for befriending him when he required it most. But there was a reason besides that. The old man had an absolute need of some one to love, and Robert L'Estrange had stepped into the vacant chamber

in his heart. He was proud of L'Estrange's liking and toleration, and his own pride in himself, and his consciousness that he had the true hempstalk of character, were flattered by L'Estrange's recognition. Finally he felt L'Estrange's superiority, and, in the old spirit of feudal devotion, would have sacrificed his life to benefit the man whom he acknowledged as his master.

When L'Estrange attempted at breakfast to open up the question of Angus's future, the old man evaded it because he had made up his mind that he must stay with L'Estrange, at least for some time. L'Estrange did not press the subject, and when he saw Angus pottering about and doing all over again the ill-done work of his laundress, he divined his purpose, and grew restive at the thought. But after a little consideration he determined to let the old man have his way; he accepted his services in the spirit in which they were offered, and delighted Angus

by asking him to do things now and again. He never, however, assumed the tone of a master; he knew exactly in what his superiority to Angus consisted—in education, in means, and in position; he treated him always as a companion, almost as a friend, this humble retainer who had, as it were, dropped from the clouds. When two men live together one must be subordinate: the *ménage* is ideal when both recognise their true relation to each other.

It was on the third day after Angus Frazer's installation in King's Bench Walk, that an event befel Robert L'Estrange of much greater moment in his life-drama than the arrival in Lincoln's Inn of the old Scotchman. This event occurred at the first garden-party of the Sixteenth Century Club, one of the most notable of the fashionable functions of the season.

From May to the end of August, London—the London of brick and lime—may be said to be in its war-paint. L'Estrange had no sympathy

with the common cry against London, and he found it, after an absence from England during the summer for several years, more picturesque and attractive than it had ever appeared to him before. The houses, the dull red and dirty yellow houses, drank in the sunshine, and flushed and blazed into crimson and gold; and the green creepers mantled them and half hid their glowing fronts. The much vilified squares looked soft and bosky; who could tell what dryads were lurking in their confined recesses! L'Estrange enjoyed it all as he drove to the Sixteenth Century Club, for the sun had the same effect on him as it had on the houses, and he blushed with pleasure at feeling himself a boy again. Such lightheartedness was getting rarer year by year with him now, and he meant to enjoy his mood while it lasted.

Perhaps the dress he wore had something to do with his high spirits. A fancy dress was *de rigueur* at the garden-parties of the Sixteenth



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Century Club. At first anything later than the sixteenth century was tabooed; but a desire for variety obtained the abolition of that bye-law, and the time was extended to the middle of the last century. But the dresses had to be historical; no comic sailor, no pantaloon, no clown, not even Mephistopheles, was tolerated in the famous old garden of the Duke of London's house. L'Estrange wore the rich costume of the early part of Charles the First's reign, and had donned with it the brilliant humour of the cavalier. He was always welcome wherever he went, and as he entered the garden from the basement drawing-rooms—the house was furnished exactly as the Duke had left it—a party of ladies and gentlemen who had chosen dresses from the same period laid hold of him with soft acclaim, and carried him off to a spacious oak summer-house, black with age, and thickly thatched with straw that the afternoon sun had turned to bronze. Here the talk was swift and happy, and none returned the

ball with a readier and more graceful stroke than L'Estrange. Then they had music: jovial catches, and glees, sweet madrigals and woeful ballads. Then they danced: a specially composed set of quadrilles which sounded very quaint and pretty and Carolean, while a great crowd of good people in fancy dresses looked on approvingly. Then they rested, and another "period" went through its ballet. They had enjoyed themselves in the pleasant exercise of their brains, their voices, and their limbs, and now they feasted their eyes. No such sight was to be seen anywhere else in the world except, perhaps, in Germany, where mighty masques are the fashion. The wide terraced garden with its two lawns quilted and diapered with glowing plots of colour, and alive with the moving pictures of lords and ladies in shapely, bright-hued garments of pleasant stuffs, "stately stepping" on the broad green walks, playing at barley-brake, dancing the hay, or lounging on the grass with laughter and songs, would have

made even a German socialist in love with, at least, one side of the old world.

"L'Estrange," said Lord Lyonesse, "in all your travels have you ever seen anything to beat this?" He turned to where he had last seen L'Estrange, but he was gone.

"Bat-like he flits," said Lady Diana Dunstan.

"Ah!" cried young Tregarven, a florid, asthmatic youth of twenty-one, who was made up as Rochester—a fat Rochester. "I always wonder how L'Estrange preserves himself."

"I think he must have found the elixir of life in his travels," said the Countess of Basingbourne. "Is there no talk of his settling down?"

"Mamma," said her daughter, a chartered libertine in conversation, "whose fault is it if there's no talk of his settling down?"

"Not yours, my dear, I am sure," replied her mother tartly.

"You've had me on show for two seasons now, mother, and when I meet the only man I have

wanted to marry, you let him slip away like a knotless thread."

"Maud," said Sybil Romaine, a lazy blonde with sultry fires in her curious amber eyes, "if you do not renounce him at once, I shall hate you and plot against your life. He is like a dream, and his blush is virginal."

"He is eccentric," said Tregarven. "He must be forty by this time; and look at his figure! He hasn't an ounce of—"

"Superfluous adiposity," suggested Lord Tintock.

"Extra weight," continued Tregarven, who turned the scale at twenty stone. "When a man is forty, with the figure of twenty, he'll go wrong somehow. He has no drag, and he'll be certain to come to a hill in the course of his life, then he'll be unable to stop, and he'll get—"

"To the bottom?" suggested Lord Tintock.

"Upset," said Tregarven, who would borrow no man's phrase.

"Obesity is often a man's guardian angel," said Lyonesse.

"And a bald head is better than rubies," said Sybil Romaine.

"L'Estrange is evidently in a perilous state," said someone else.

"Every second or third L'Estrange does something terrible," said the Countess of Basingbourne. "What was it this one's great-grandfather did? It was a climax of horrors. Lyonesse, do you remember?"

"I do—rather. He believed that his wife had been unfaithful, so he buried her alive. Discovering afterwards that he had been mistaken, he starved himself to death upon her grave."

"Oh!" said Maud, turning pale and shivering. "I renounce him. Sybil, I would not object to be beheaded. Bluebeard, in fact, has always been a favourite of mine—but buried alive!"

"What must love mean to a man like that?" said Sybil Romaine dreamily, but with lightnings

playing through her long lashes. "Some heavy penalty ought to attend the supreme happiness of being his wife," she added in a whisper to Maud.

"Such as being buried alive, dear," said the other girl with a smile.

"That is really an extraordinary family," said Tregarven. "For centuries there has never been more than one of them alive at a time."

"Oh!" interrupted Lord Tintock, "are the L'Estranges always posthumous?"

"Will you allow me to finish my sentence?" said Tregarven. "There never," he resumed with fatuous solemnity, "has been more than one of them alive at a time, that is, after his father died." The sentence was difficult to finish. "It's most extraordinary," he added. Tregarven was the eldest of thirteen, eight sons and five daughters, all alive and all born in lawful wedlock to the Earl of Grandfesse.

It ought to be observed, that with the excep-

tion of Lord Lyonesse, the choicer spirits left the particular circle that had welcomed L'Estrange at the same time as he. Lord Lyonesse now withdrew also, and like a group of society ghouls, the Countess of Basingbourne and her special friends gathered to mumble and snarl over the bones of many a fair, and, it must be admitted, many a blemished reputation, which is a poetic way of explaining that they began to talk scandal, break butterflies on this wheel, etc.

What had become of L'Estrange?

He had sauntered away by himself to the top of one of the lawns, where he watched for a while the wonderful scene, pleased, and, as far as it was possible for him, at rest. "Chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancy," he turned to a part of the garden which seemed to be deserted, and strolled into a conservatory where great fronded plants grew with a languor as of the harem, and a forest of orchids uncoiled their curious or lovely forms, and "hung out" to the passer-by their

blushes of varied hues. He walked the length of the conservatory on one side slowly. On arriving at the top he turned sharply, as he intended to go out without pausing to examine anything on the other side. The passage at the top was narrow, the plants on either hand high and thick, and he nearly ran against a lady, who was slowly rounding the point as he brushed past.

In starting aside to avoid him, the lady struck against the stone wall that contained the soil in the centre of the conservatory. He apologised, and the lady murmured something. At the door he met her again. She dropped her hand with a quick motion from her side, where she had been tightly pressing it. The gesture, apparently intended to be hidden from L'Estrange, was noticed by him, and brought out on his cheek that bright blush which Sybil Romaine had called "virginal." Afraid that she had been hurt, L'Estrange apologised again with a bashfulness



which was particularly attractive to this lady, and would have been to most ladies.

"It is nothing," she said, breathing quickly.

"I am afraid, in saying so, you wish to spare me," said L'Estrange, who observed her rapid breathing, and still thought it was the result of restraining some expression of pain. An impartial observer would have said it proceeded from a particularly quick walk down the long conservatory. Had she not reached the door as soon as L'Estrange?

"Can I help you? Will you allow me to escort you to your party?" he asked with *empressement*, as the lady showed signs of increasing weakness.

"My party," she said with an indescribable accent, and a gesture that seemed to chide her own exhibition of weakness. Then she appeared to be angry with herself for having allowed the exclamation to escape her.

"I have no friends here," she said. "So I

thought I would look at the flowers—I love them so ; and then go home !”

L'Estrange did not know what to say. The lady leant over a sensitive plant that stood beside them, and fondled it with her little pink-tipped fingers—fingers that looked the incarnation of the sense of touch.

She looked up, bowed to L'Estrange and turned towards the door.

L'Estrange made a slight motion as if to detain her, but said nothing. She stood still, and looked at him expectantly over her shoulder.

Never, he thought, had he seen anything so lovely. It was her eyes that held him. As her head moved slightly and the light shifted, they changed from the deep violet velvet of the broad-shielded pansy to the lighter and more intense hue of the “corn-flower” sapphire ; anon they looked like wells of light that had gathered into themselves the azure of a whole firmament. For a few brief, fatal seconds his soul bathed its fill in the

depths of these blue orbs, and when they withdrew their light, they left him like one who had plunged into an enchanted fountain, the slave for ever of the naiad whose sweet waters had enticed him in.

She left the conservatory; L'Estrange followed her, and walked at her side in silence, stealing glances at her as they went along.

She wore an old-world robe of white silk—dull silk, as white and as soft as snow; no single thread shone, but in its fold and dimples shadows seemed to hide away sweet secrets; and where it swelled in caressing folds it looked like little feathery clouds whose outward purity gave no token of the soft splendour of the silver lining within, reflected from what moons and stars a lover dare hardly whisper to himself. The hem of the robe was dead gold; and a little tufted shoe like the very bolts of Cupid peeped out ever and anon as the lady walked, or rather glided, along the smooth turf, and we all know what that amorous knight,

Sir John Suckling, said about the little niece that feared the light. But the undulating grace of her motion and the symmetry of her form were nothing to the wonder of her hair and eyes. The classical convention had been traversed in the arrangements of her golden tresses. They hung loose, down far past her waist, and floated about her like a cloud; some attempt had been made to restrain them, but the fillet had slipped, and the summer wind did its will on them—happy Zephyr! and the starry eyes that shone out of his golden cloud—had they not in a few seconds melted the pride and austerity of Robert L'Estrange?

“I think I shall go home now,” she said.

He turned with her towards the house, still silent and watching her.

“I shall never forget this scene,” she continued, “it has been one of the dreams of my life to be present at a Sixteenth Century Garden-party. How grateful I shall always be for the invitation!”

“You have, at least, one friend here then,” said L’Estrange.

“A patroness,” was the lady’s emendation.

“Shall I take you to her?”

“Unfortunately she was unable to come at the last moment.”

“Then you came alone?”

The lady assented with a little sigh, and a sunny smile.

L’Estrange did not pity her, she was too lovely to be pitied; and in all her gestures and movements there was a quiet sense of power indicative of great self-reliance: at least L’Estrange thought so; a more cynical observer might have said that the chief characteristic of her manner was a daring *insouciance*, indicative certainly of self-reliance, but also of less excellent qualities. Although the little sigh seemed to make a sort of half-hearted appeal for pity, the sympathy that it evoked in L’Estrange was untinged by any feeling of commiseration. Here was a lonely being like

himself ; one who, possibly, had numerous acquaintances but very few friends—none she had said ; a most beautiful creature, that moved like a spirit, hardly touching the earth, a tender, delicate woman, fresh as a girl—yet a woman whose prime had just begun ; with a low, clear voice like a little golden bell, and such a wealthy harvest of golden hair, and such deep blue eyes !—he felt as if he were sinking and turned giddy, when they streamed their light about him. He did not stop to consider what circumstances might distinguish their loneliness. He was a solitary by choice ; it was not likely that a beautiful young woman, sweet-tempered and emotional, would prefer a friendless existence ; but that did not occur to him. Was she ambitious ? How did she occupy herself ? What were her hopes and fears ? He must know this woman ; he must see her in her various moods ; she more than interested him ; already he wanted to enter into her life. Silently he walked at her side, watching, scrutinising ;

and now and again she glanced at him with wonder: he was also a mystery to her, a great mystery. Could it be possible that she had never met a Sir Galahad before?

They had to pass through a crowd in order to arrive at the house. It was a widely dispersed crowd, and there was plenty of room to pierce it without jostling anyone. Why, then, was there a broad lane formed for the passage of L'Estrange and his companion? What was it that Sybil Romaine whispered to Maud Basingbourne, while the forked lightning flashed through her half-closed lids? What was it that Lord Tintock took so long to tell Tregarven? L'Estrange did not notice these social phenomena; but he did notice his companion's stealthy glance to right and left; and he thought how modest, how innocent, how fearful of the observation of strangers she was. Could it be that these stealthy glances meant that the lady knew why a lane was formed, and why the sly whisper passed from ear to ear?

When they entered the house the lady went to get her wraps; and the two met once more at the front gates.

“Will it be indiscreet to hope that I shall have the pleasure of seeing you at any of the imminent functions?” asked L’Estrange.

“Why not?” said the lady. “You go to the Prayer-book Parade I suppose. Everybody does—and then we can nod distantly,” she added with a little laugh. Could the interrogation in her smile have meant that the lady did not know whether it was an assignation or not? “We haven’t been introduced, you know.”

“My name is Robert L’Estrange,” said the swain, simply.

“Robert L’Estrange—the name seems familiar, Mr. L’Estrange,” said the syren. “Good-bye,” she added, and then she bowed.

“*Au revoir*,” replied L’Estrange as he raised his hat.

L’Estrange went to his chambers at once, and



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without changing his cavalier dress, lay down in his hammock, and lit a big cigar. He smoked it, and lit another, and yet another. He lay for hours, and burned more tobacco in that evening than was good for him.

Angus Frazer came down twice from the attic he now occupied, and knocked at the door of his suzerain; but receiving no answer, returned to the study of the Directory and the map of London; for Angus thought he might manage to become a London postman, if, or when, L'Estrange tired of him. "This is too good to last," he said to himself. "My left-handed luck will overtake me soon."



## CHAPTER VI.

### A HASTY ENGAGEMENT.

L'ESTRANGE smoked.

One often wonders how Sir Galahad and Sir Tristram, and Sir Launcelot of the Lake got on without tobacco. Had there been cigars at the Round Table it is possible that the goodly fellowship would not have been "unsoldered" in such a hurry. On the other hand, the romantic quests and Berserker expeditions our forefathers undertook on the slightest provocation, or, all the more gloriously, on none, might not have filled the world with the fame of more or less incredible achievements, which our poets seem never tired of telling, had the good knights been able to sooth their heated blood and exasperated

nerves in the peaceful worship of St. Nicotine. Sir Launcelot might have smoked out his illicit, though lofty passion; Sir Tristram with a pipe or two might have undone the enchantment of the goblet he drank with Iseult; and if Merlin had smoked—why he might be knocking about the world still, in spite of naughty Vivien, instead of sitting cooped up in that old oak in the forest of Broceliande! But Sir Galahad, what of him? What effect would the seductive, if somewhat gross fumes of the noble plant have had on his ethereal imagination? Who can tell? As for our Sir Galahad, it held him dreaming for hours, and then sent him to his note-book.

“You are not a youth, Robert L’Estrange,” he wrote, “to be ensnared by a pair of blue eyes, a ripe lip, and a cloud of golden hair. You have not passed through half your life heart-whole to be stricken by the glances of a mere girl in a fantastic dress; nor are you overcome; love, especially love at first sight, does not sit down

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with a note-book and a cigar to cross-question itself. You have simply had an unusual experience in the company of this young woman—an unusual experience for you, but a common one, doubtless, with those who frequent the society of women. You met her curiously; and it is certain that you have never talked with any woman so frank and innocent. Perhaps, also, anything so lovely in that purest type of it has not been your lot to observe; there may be hundreds like her, as far as her mere appearance goes; but her guileless nature and gentle disposition are perhaps not so common; and anything like the healthy freedom of her looks and movements you cannot find in your memories of the few drawing-rooms you have been beguiled into visiting. Stop, now, Robert L'Estrange. You've to talk to yourself here. Don't write long, clumsy sentences. Try and put down what you think. Are you thinking? Have you once thought, once used your brain consciously, since you left the garden-party? Not

you ; you've been dreaming, dreaming like a school-boy, about a pair of blue eyes."

Here a sentence or two were half-written, and then scored out. He paused for a little, and when he resumed he possibly believed he was thinking.

"She is surely the loveliest and purest of all God's creatures. Why do men not kill each other for her? What can I do to be worthy of her? That is blasphemy. Though I were to gather and wear all the bays and laurels that grow in the garden of fame, I would not be worthy to touch the hem of her garment with my lips. Who dare aspire to have this woman for his very own? What labour, what sweat of blood, could give a man the right to steep his sight in her answering eyes? Could any anguish, any torture purify one's lips for hers? To put one's hand under her hair and clasp her neck! Some angel almost as pure as herself might dare to do it! To look at her—to think of her—

needs a hardihood that only the most worshipful love could excuse. And I! I may see her to-morrow; I may perhaps touch her hand; I may walk with her in the sight of men and angels."

Another pause; then—still thinking, doubtless—

"I have loved this woman all my life. I, who thought I knew not love, have always been in love—with her. My heart has not been *empty*, but it has been *shut* till now. So well I knew her, and so well I loved her, that when she was driven against me by fate, it was as if my heart had opened and she had sprung out—I seemed to give her birth. And now I must have her back again; she must be mine, worthy or unworthy. No man on earth has loved her so long, so deeply, so purely as I, and no man could cherish her as I would—as I will. They might drain my blood drop by drop, and fill up my heart and veins with boiling lead, if that would save her a moment's pang. There is no man less worthy of her than I, but there is no man who

could do more than I to make her happy—give her his whole life—my whole life. My God! and half of it is done. But yet I am all hers from the beginning—from the beginning. Not one drop of blood in this body of mine has ever throbbed for another woman. I am hers—all hers. It is little; but I could not come to her otherwise. I could not ask her white soul to take mine, if I did not bring it to her in one thing as pure as God sent it into the world—almost as pure as hers. Robert L'Estrange, you're a braggart, a fool, and a prig," he muttered.

He sprang from his hammock, tore the pages he had just written from his book, burnt them, and went out. In half an hour he returned. He wanted someone to talk to; but nothing London-bred would suit him; it was a natural man he needed; so he went up to Angus Frazer's attic.

Angus had intermitted his study of the map of London, and knelt at the open window smoking,



when L'Estrange entered. Until midnight he sat on the floor, filling pipe after pipe while his master talked to him. Occasionally the old Scotchman interjected a remark, or put a question. With these exceptions, L'Estrange's speech flowed on in an unbroken stream. He talked of his travels, of men and books, and amazed Angus by the extent of his knowledge, the pithiness of his criticisms, and the originality of his ideas. It was a great relief to L'Estrange; his mind was intensely excited, and, by giving himself an auditor, and by talking of subjects that were part and parcel of his life, he kept his hands full, so to speak. The vision of golden hair and blue eyes was always there in the background, ready, if he ceased talking for a moment, to step forward and be the whole and only picture; and he rebelled against its usurpation. He was afraid of it. At thirty-eight years of age a man begins to imagine that his mind is made up on most subjects; his habits are all formed, and if he is un-

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married their power over and in him is much greater than in the case of a Benedict, who has presumably, if he's been lucky, shared the most intimate thoughts and feelings of another for years, and whose habits, especially his external habits, have been kept in all likelihood in a fluctuating condition by the gradual increase of his family. L'Estrange felt the change beginning. He knew perfectly that, in this long discourse to Angus, he was the L'Estrange of the past, for the last time; and he drove the figure to the background, and held his newborn love at bay within him. In order to be the L'Estrange of the forenoon, the L'Estrange he had been for eight-and-thirty years, he was acting a part. And at the bottom of it all, there was the fierce repulsion that is the immediate reaction after love has taken possession of a virginal nature; his soul felt as if it had been outraged and rose in arms—in vain; for, when, tired of talking, he returned to his own room, the shining figure

stepped forward, and with small, soft fingers took away the spear and the shield and the steel gauntlets, undid the clasps of the helmet and of the breast-plate, and made the willing soul captive, with a single thread of her golden hair.

He slept most of the night, and dreamt a succession of wild dreams. All the day-dreams that he ought to have dreamt in his youth seemed to be crowded into that one restless night. Now he held her wrapped in his cloak in his left arm, while he fought against odds—one to three—with his back against a wall. Then he carried her through snowstorms; he half-naked, having wrapped his garments about her. Sometimes he saved her from drowning, sometimes from falling over precipices; or he found her tied to a tree, while bandits cast dice for her, and, after a terrible struggle, he freed her. Every instance of heroism in a lover that he had read of he enacted in his dreams. He lived a hundred lives; performed a thousand feats of valour. Wonderful dark or auburn beauties

came and tempted him with riches and power, if he would forsake her for them; but he was obdurate: and always she had seen and heard, and gazed on him with loving, trustful eyes. So wild and so ultra-romantic were his dreams that when he was fully awake he blushed at the thought of them—the deep crimson blush that had struck Sybil Romaine's ardent fancy.

The morning passed—how, he couldn't have told; and he drove to the park. He was far too soon; still she might be there; so he did not go into it. He hadn't the courage; he was trembling like a girl. At last, white, but resolute, after walking along the edge of the Green Park for a while, he joined the well and ill-dressed crowd at the edge of Rotten Row.

As he entered the park a weary, but lovely, face brightened into a hopeful smile; a pair of large steel-blue eyes grew critical, and watched expectant. When the eyes saw that L'Estrange looked about with eager, searching glance, they became less

anxious; and when L'Estrange, noticing the eyes, went straight towards them, they softened and deepened into the fathomless, bewitching wells of light in which his "delighted spirit" had bathed the day before.

The little hand he seized so excitedly seemed to nestle in his when he loosened his grasp, and the lithe, supple figure bent towards him like a flower to the sun.

She was more beautiful than ever, he thought. She was again dressed in white, quietly this time, but her bodice fitted like a glove, and the bits of blue ribbon were put to shame by her eyes; the gold on her wrists couldn't vie with her coiled hair; and the white pearls she wore were dim beside her whiter neck.

He said nothing—not a word; if he opened his lips he felt that the one sentence would burst out. She wondered, and wondered; and walked by his side demurely.

Tregarven passed and stared, but didn't bow;

Tintock nodded with a sardonic grin; Lyonesse turned away his head. L'Estrange thought it curious, but found a reason.

"My friends," he said, breaking silence at last, "are so astonished to find me in any woman's company that they forget the ordinary rules of good breeding."

"It is long since I walked on any one's arm in the park," said the lady with great deliberation.

"Indeed!" said L'Estrange; and there was joy in his foolish heart. "Perhaps you have not cared for a cavalier. That would be remarkable, for I have the reputation, and with some cause, of being a woman-hater."

"And is that the reason," said the lady, unable to conceal her surprise, "that you think your friends fail to bow to you?"

"There can be no other that I know of," he replied carelessly.

A half-scornful, half-pitiful, look shot across the lady's face.

“Let us get away from this mob,” he said.

He led her through the ranks of seats, across the Row, through the crowd of riders, and struck out for the centre of the park; and there he told her of his love. It was sudden, brutal if you will, but that is what happened. And this is a true history. He told her all his life, his ambition, his failures, he did what all men love to do in speaking to the woman they love, he talked about himself—his thoughts of suicide, and his loveless years: he pleaded passionately for some return of affection and grasped her sleeve with both hands, just as a drowning mariner might clutch a floating spar.

“Do not cast me away,” he cried with a desperate cry, that came not from his voice alone but from the depths of his being: it was as if his body had been shivered asunder to emit that cry. His own utter unworthiness of the great happiness he saw almost within his grasp overpowered him with shame and distress.

The woman who at first had looked about afraid of witnesses forgot the *convenances* in presence of the anguish, the convulsion of passion, that wrung the man at her side. She grew pale, trembled, and for the first time since she had ceased to be an inexperienced girl she hesitated—yes, hesitated, and with such a life-prize in the net. For this man loved her, loved her from the very bottom of his soul—and this woman knew it.

L'Estrange still clutched at her dress—he was very much in earnest you see. He trembled for a moment or two, and then he grew still. She would either take him or reject him: the next sun would see him either dead or happy. Strange mad thoughts passed through his head in that moment of waiting: he would use Angus Frazer's pistol, and there would be no fear of its not killing *him*. First of all he would make a will, leaving all his money to this woman—no, there should be something for Angus. Then



he would come and shoot himself *here*. Then — Something thrilled through him. He looked up; she had kissed him on the cheek. He took both her hands, and looked into her eyes. The veined lids flickered and fell, but the blue heavens shone through them. A tear-drop would have fallen from the long silken lashes had he not kissed it away.

“You have made me the happiest man in all the world,” he said, as they turned their steps back towards Hyde Park Corner. He could find nothing else to say but that; or rather the words burst from his heart without searching, the common hackneyed words that everybody uses—almost everybody—some time or other, and which seem so fresh, so brand-new, when they are used, that the speaker feels as if he were the first that had employed them from the beginning of time.

“Will you take me home?” asked the lady shyly.

Would he take her home? Would he lay down his life for her? Why did she not ask him to do something difficult, something that would task all his powers.

"Who is there at home?" he asked.

"Oh, I live with a distant relation."

"Have you none nearer?"

"Yes, but I—don't like them—and they don't like me. We don't get on, in fact," she added shortly.

"What miserable creatures they must be," he thought.

"But your name, your name?" he said suddenly, stopping and laying his hand on her shoulder. He laughed at the thought that he had wooed and won a woman, and had never even asked her name.

Any one not in love with the lady would have said that she turned pale, and that a look of fear crossed her face at the question. As she answered, an observant person would have said

that the muscles of her face tightened, and that defiance flashed from her eyes.

"Sophie Dale is my name," she murmured in that soft, purring voice of hers.

"Sophie Dale," repeated L'Estrange enraptured. Evidently he had never heard the name before. The impartial observer already referred to would have said that a great surge of hope passed through Miss Dale's heart and brain at her companion's reception of her name. He had never heard it—thank God for that.

"But I know *your* name," she said, "it is Robert L'Estrange; you told me so. Robert L'Estrange," she whispered again, caressing the words. Then she pressed close to his side, and lifting his hand, kissed it.



## CHAPTER VII.

### BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM.

THE distant relation with whom Miss Sophie Dale resided was called Mrs. Marlate. That a relationship did exist between the two ladies it would be idle to dispute, and it would be equally idle to deny that the consanguinity was very remote. To give some idea of the nearness as of the distance of this relationship, it is sufficient to say that they both belonged to the Aryan race; but not even Sophie knew of what nationality Mrs. Marlate was. It was a question if Mrs. Marlate herself knew.

Sophie, as we know, had not always lived with Mrs. Marlate. When she was left an orphan at the age of twenty-one, her uncle, the Dean of Belcaster, received her with open arms, that were expanded

all the more widely because of a certain two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of income that accompanied Miss Dale wherever she went. Whether it was that the Dean found his fair niece required the whole two-hundred-and-fifty, and more, for pin-money, or because of her scandalous flirtations with every wealthy unmarried man she met who was at all eligible—that is to say, in any way a catch—the good Dean thought it convenient after a month or two to allow her to have her own way and go to London. And surely Miss Dale was right. Is there a better marriage-market anywhere than in the modern Babylon? Customers were slow, however, to come her way—the customers she wanted. A pair of wonderful blue eyes, a head of golden hair, a well-shaped body, sound and vigorous, with two-hundred-and-fifty a year in addition: these she wished to exchange for a title if possible, at all events for a sounding name, a town residence, and a country residence, and anything from five thousand a year upwards, with a husband thrown in. Several

times she had almost effected a capture to her mind : but an over-readiness on her part had broken off the match.

Her first year in London had been spent with various friends and relations of the family, but at the end of that time they were all tired of her, and she had to find out a perch of her own. It was then that she replied to the following advertisement : "Widow lady, thirty, wishes a companion to share her house. Must be young, well-connected, and have small income," and discovered her *very* distant relative, Mrs. Marlate.

Mrs. Marlate, proving to be the very instructress Sophie was sadly in need of, taught her how to play her cards, for Mrs. Marlate was a very skilful player indeed. The craving for a husband and a position continued, but Miss Dale found the market more against her than ever. When things are dull beauty is at a considerable discount. Miss Dale had plenty of offers, but not from the right sort of men. All the houses that she had visited on her arrival in

London were still open to her, but people talked—people will talk.

That in brief is her history to the age of twenty-five, and the commencement of our story.

Six hundred a year, even with a husband like L'Estrange thrown in, was a downcome from five thousand, and two houses: but she had begun to perceive that the shadows were lengthening, and she was of opinion that it is better to sell than not to sell, however small the price. Indeed she had begun to think when she found herself isolated at the garden-party that there was no husband in the lucky-bag for her at all. It was on that account, as well as from the fact that L'Estrange was not a boy, although he did not look anything like his age, that she jumped at him, and led a heart at once—hearts being trumps.

The preliminaries to marriage you may be sure were not delayed by Miss Sophie Dale.

It was a fashionable marriage in one sense of the word: there were lots of well-dressed people, you



know, and as for the presents, they were numerous and valuable; but it was a "shy" wedding all the same. A ridiculously large number of invitations had been issued; that was Mrs. Marlate's doing, and it was quite contrary to Sophie Dale's wish.

"My dear," said the elder and more experienced lady, "you'd better leave it to me. I mean to issue the invitations broadcast: people won't come, you know, but the wise bird, Sophie dear, feathers its nest. You never know what's going to turn up; you'll never have such a chance of feathering your nest again. Mr. Squaretoes may decline the invitation, an invitation which includes Mrs. Squaretoes, though he'd be glad enough to dine here with a party of men in the ordinary way: and Mrs. Squaretoes doesn't even know of my existence, poor thing: but old Squaretoes will send you a present all the same; it may be a silver salad bowl, or it may be merely a redundant set of salt-cellar; in either case they're silver, and 'portable property,' as Mr. Swiveller says. An invitation to a wedding, Sophie

dear, necessitates a present on the part of the victim ; it's a kind of respectable blackmailing. Put your feelings in your pocket, Sophie, we are women of the world."

"Hardly," said Sophie Dale, with a cruel meaning, which her mentor fully understood, "I wish we were."

"*You* will be at all events, Sophie—being one of the lucky ones—as soon as you are married to Robert L'Estrange," said Mrs. Marlate, who always returned a blow, and, as a rule, hit straight from the shoulder. "I am only a poor little widow."

"Of Ephesus," said Miss Dale, spitefully.

"Don't tease, Sophie," replied the matter-of-fact Mrs. Marlate ; "let me go on with my list of contributors."

The result of Mrs. Marlate's machinations was thoroughly successful ; the presents rained in. Mrs. Marlate's back drawing-room on the wedding day much resembled the show-room of a silver-

smith and jeweller's. She had been perfectly correct in her speculations. Mr. Squaretoes did send a silver salad-bowl; there was a card on it with Mr. and Mrs. Squaretoes' best wishes for Miss Dale's happiness; but I am bound to add that Mrs. Squaretoes was never aware of her husband's extraordinary liberality in the matter of their united and appropriate, but highly extravagant wedding-gift. The articles of valuable personal adornment were innumerable, for Sophie Dale had many admirers, and the *épergne* sent by the Dean of Belcaster, the uncle of the bride, made a brave show; and nobody, save that artful Mrs. Marlate, Sophie's friend, knew that it was B quality, plated on copper. To each of the guests Mrs. Marlate remarked, "This is a present from her uncle, the Dean; she is his favourite niece, you know." The real fact is that the *épergne* was hired for the occasion from Spick and Span of Bond Street, and carefully returned to those gentlemen on the following day.

A brave show, a valuable exhibition of the arts and crafts of the silversmith and jeweller, and a wonderful tribute to the beauty and fascinations of Miss Sophie Dale. They were all exhibited, every one of them, for the delectation of the wedding guests; all but Jack Burlington's wedding-gift, which went into the dust-bin: that fat-headed youth had sent what he called a floral tribute in the shape of an artfully constructed banjo, formed entirely of forget-me-nots.

"A joke's a joke, my dear," said Mrs. Marlate, in her just indignation. "Burlington is a beast," she added, in an angry tone, "and I shall erase his name from my visiting-list."

Poor Burlington!

The wedding was exactly like other fashionable weddings. Mr. Saltfish of *The Tarradiddle* was there, and Mr. Slyboots, who does the high life intelligence in *The Sphere*. I think it will save a lot of trouble if I give Saltfish's description. Here it is *verbatim*.

“Among the really nice girls who have been prominent amid the fairest lights of London society for the last few seasons, Miss Dale, the Dean of Belcaster’s niece, was *facile princeps* (*facile princeps* are two of the five stock Latin words that Saltfish habitually uses). The numerous and valuable wedding presents were a real sight for sore eyes. The bride’s costume was a triumph of Madame Hortense’s well-known *atelier*—it was an exquisite gown of *crépe de Japon* over ivory satin with a short train. The common nuisance of bridesmaids was departed from at this ultra-fashionable wedding which took place from Mrs. Marlate’s charming bijou residence in Kensington.

“Three dear little boys in slashed doublets and trunk hose of rich *gros de Naples* of Chinese white relieved by steel ornaments, replaced the inevitable girl of the period. Dressed in copper-coloured silk, Mrs. Marlate received the company, while the Honourable Mrs. Slangdon Topper wore

electric blue ornamented with rainbow *passementerie*. The wedding was celebrated at St. Cunegonde's, with full choral service; and the clear bell-like voice of the Dean of Belcaster, the uncle of the bride, rendered every word of the impressive ceremony distinctly audible to the large and fashionable congregation that crowded the sacred edifice. Mendelssohn Pugwash, Mus. Doc., officiated at the organ. The bridegroom, Mr. Robert L'Estrange, a gentleman better known at the Bar and in literary circles than in society, was the fortunate bridegroom. The happy pair left for Folkestone where they propose spending their honeymoon. On leaving, the bride wore a costume of," etc., etc.

If we date from the moment they left the church Mr. and Mrs. L'Estrange's honeymoon lasted about twenty-seven hours.

They arrived in Folkestone in the afternoon and went at once to the rooms that had been secured for them at the Pavilion Hotel.

In the evening they sat on the balcony of their sitting-room, shaded from prying looks, but with a magnificent view of shore and sea. Mrs. L'Estrange watched the water, and Robert watched her eyes.

"A sovereign for your thoughts, Sophie," he cried.

Was it not the honeymoon? He held out the gold coin on the palm of his left hand.

"I was thinking," she said, putting her hand in his, though she did not take the sovereign, "how cruel the sea is. It is beautiful: therefore it must be cruel."

"Yes," said L'Estrange: "beauty is often cruel."

"Zola says that it is always cruel—that it must be cruel in spite of itself."

"Zola? You read Zola?"

Mrs. L'Estrange would have preferred not to let her husband know that she read Zola—not until after the honeymoon at any rate. It had slipped from her now, however, so she had to make the best of it.

"Some of him," she said. "His were almost the only books Mrs. Marlate had."

Another slip, as Mrs. L'Estrange saw at once from her husband's expression.

"Do you know French well?" he asked.

"Not very."

He bent towards her and looked into her eyes, a deep searching look. Dark blue in the shadow like midnight skies, they seemed to pulse with nothing but innocence and trust in him.

"My darling," he said, kissing the hand that still lay in his. "The stars look down on every sinful night, and who shall say that they are less pure than they were when time began?"

She did not quite grasp the application to herself, but she knew that one was intended, in which she was praised; so she took his face in her little soft hands—the sovereign fell, rolled away, and dropped on the pavement beneath. In another woman it might have been an over-confident caress on her marriage day: but it was



done so simply, so innocently, and there was such modesty, such deference in the soft kiss she laid on his forehead that it seemed the sweetest expression of the chastest love.

"I am not worthy of you," he said. "I am not worthy of you."

"Sophie," he began, after a pause, "do you know that you have not yet said those words that I want very much to hear?"

"What are they, Robert?"

"You have never said 'I love you.'"

"Have I not?"

"No."

"Why should I say them? Have I not done them?"

"Yes, but I want to hear them."

"Well, you will hear them."

"When?"

"Soon. And do you know, Robert, that you have never told me how old you are?"

"You never asked me. But did you not know my age when you signed the register?"

"No. How old are you, Robert?"

"I was thirty-eight a week or two ago."

"Thirty-eight. I can hardly believe it. You do not look any older than me."

"Not any older than you in years, perhaps, but much, much older than you are. You are in your teens still, Sophie, in beauty, and in innocence."

"Do people become very sinful by the time they are thirty-eight?" she asked lightly. But she saw he didn't like it, so she amended it. "I mean, can one not retain one's innocence always, although beauty may go? Are you not as innocent as—as I am?"

"No; I know things that I feel in your presence are stains on my memory."

"Did you ever do anything wicked—I mean very wicked? Did you—" Again she saw her question was disliked, and again she amended it. "Did you ever love any woman before me? Dear," she added, "shall we confess each other?"

What had she said? Was she mad? "Confess each other!" There is a fearful joy for some natures in walking on the very brink of a precipice.

"Confess each other?" he echoed. "Have you anything to confess?"

Warily, warily, Sophie L'Estrange.

She raised her eyes, her deep, innocent eyes, that the black pupils filled up almost entirely in the waning light, and looked him full in the face.

"Yes, yes, my husband," she said. "I have much to confess. I cannot be at rest until I tell you, because you make me ashamed when you think me so ignorant of wrong—I have been very wicked; I have been selfish all my life. I have told lies. I have hated friends who wanted to be kind to me. I have allowed men, whom I couldn't care for, to fall in love with me. I have thought bad things, and made many people miserable. And I cannot be your wife until you have

forgiven me for all the wrong I have ever done—all the wrong I have ever done."

Her husband gathered her up in his arms, and hid her in his breast. Her poor, little, school-girl confession! He covered her face, and hands, and neck with kisses, and held her long and close.

"Say it," she whispered. "Say I forgive you all the wrong you have ever done."

"Forgive you, my darling," he said. "I thank God that you are human."

"Say it," she said, breathlessly. "Say it. I shall be miserable until you say it."

He said it: her heart ceased its violent throbbing, and she lay at peace.

"Sophie,"—his mouth was close to her ear, and he whispered so softly that she rather divined than heard what he said—"I never loved any woman at all before I met you. I used to kiss my cousins when I was a boy, or rather they used to kiss me. You are the only woman I

have ever kissed voluntarily. That was wrong of me. I should have loved with all my heart long ago: but I was proud and ambitious, and wished to be unlike other men. It was wrong, I verily believe; but how happy it makes me now. All the treasures of my love in these long years are gathered up for you."

It was night now. The summer moon floated up out of the sea, casting its broad bright shadow over the dark waves and so up, and up, and up, until it shone into the balcony. The bride and bridegroom rose, and looked out on the world of waters.

"Is the sea still cruel?" he asked.

"I do not know why," she said, clinging to him, "but it seems to menace me. Those curling waves, soft and silvery as they look, could strangle."

She turned her back on the sea and looked up in his face, surely the most lovely, most tremulous bride in all the world that night.

“Now, now,” he said. “Say it now. Say I love you.”

She laid her head on his shoulder as if about to comply with his demand ; but something seemed to strike her, and she said, “Not yet, Robert.”

She withdrew herself from his embrace, and went to the window. Turning there, she blew one kiss to the moon, and two to him, and vanished into the dark room. He remained for a little longer watching the sea and the sky. Then he also went in, and the bride said to the bridegroom the three words he burned to hear.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE BLUE ENVELOPE.

By eleven o'clock on the morning after the wedding, breakfast was over, and Robert L'Estrange stood once more on the balcony waiting till Sophie should put on her hat.

"Good morning, Mr. L'Estrange," said a pleasant voice with a Scotch accent behind him.

"Hulloa!" said L'Estrange, turning round, "what has brought you down here, Angus Frazer?"

Angus surveyed L'Estrange admiringly before he answered. His young friend and patron was certainly worth looking at. You would have said he wasn't any more than twenty-one had you seen him that morning with his uplifted,

radiant face, and masterful air. Angus saw he was happy, and rejoiced in his rugged soul, in spite of his left-handed luck; for L'Estrange had let him know that they would have to part company after his marriage. Meantime he took charge of L'Estrange's rooms till the honeymoon should be over.

"This is what brought me down," he said at length, handing a blue envelope to L'Estrange. "It came early this morning; it's marked 'immediate,' so I took an express train."

"How good of you!" said L'Estrange. "I can't imagine what it is."

He opened the envelope, and took out what seemed to be a long letter, of four sheets.

"My dear L'Estrange," was on the first sheet. "My dearest"—What?—And whose writing is this? Whose writing in the name of God?

L'Estrange crumpled the papers in one hand, and held on to the railing with the other. He gazed at the sea, he gazed at the sky, he gazed



at Angus. The misery in his look and the pallor of his face brought tears to the old Scotchman's eyes. There must have been something very alarming in the letter that had taken in a moment the splendour and strength out of the bridegroom as if he had been struck with a palsy.

"What is it? May I know what is the matter?" said Angus.

"I don't know myself yet, Angus; and I'm afraid to know. Angus Frazer, I would cut off my right hand—I would hack it off with that blunt bread-knife in there—that she laughed so merrily at a few minutes ago—" He paused for several seconds, crushing the letters, and beating the railing of the balcony with his disengaged hand till the blood came. Then he finished his sentence—"if I hadn't to read these letters—if I hadn't to read them. There may be nothing wrong; but I would sacrifice a hand not to have to read them"

“A man must dree his weird,” said Angus.  
“But *must* you read them?”

“I *must* read them. Mrs. L'Estrange will be here immediately. Tell her I have gone to the writing-room on urgent business, and shall be some time.”

The writing-room was empty, and L'Estrange chose a well-lighted seat, but he hadn't read two lines when he rose and went into the darkest corner. He would have gone into the bowels of the earth if he could. After reading the letters twice over he looked like a dead man; his lips were white, his face pinched, and his eyes sunk in his head. The bridegroom, who has to read what follows on the morning after his marriage, needs to have a strong brain if he is not to go mad.

“My dear L'Estrange,—I have just heard that you are about to marry Sophie Dale either to-day or to-morrow, my informant could not tell me

which. I trust my communication will be in time to prevent your making such an irreparable blunder. This letter and the enclosures are strictly confidential. I hope I need not add that I am actuated by the sincerest friendship. To kiss and tell has never been my practice. I regard it with the rest of the world as dishonourable. In this case it is to save you, and that, I think, exonerates me.

“Miss Sophie Dale was my mistress for two months. It was she who, in the Café Cosmopolite, obtained from me an invitation to the Sixteenth Century garden-party. In proof of my assertion, I select from about a dozen letters of hers these three, numbered 1, 2, 3, as they are not dated, in the order in which I received them.

“With the deepest regret for the pain this will cause you,

“I am,

“Sincerely yours,

“TINTOCK.’

## I.

“You stupid dear,—Do I love you? Is there anything left for me to do to prove it? Come, come, come to me! I swear to you I never really loved anybody before. I think about you all day, and dream about you all night.

“When I think of it, this is a very strange letter of yours, and though I am writing one I have not yet made up my mind to send you a reply. You cannot see me for three days, and you want me to write you a letter—a love-letter, you say. Can I trust you with a letter? Now, don’t become righteously indignant. You know very well what young men do with letters from ladies. Who was it that showed me one from Lady Dolly, eh, Charlie? You see, if I sign this I am putting my good name in your hands. Well, I will sign it; but here is my condition. You must either return it to me when you come, or bring with you that love of a pearl necklace that

we saw just beneath the case of men's rings in the left-hand corner of the window in Harryman's in Bond Street. If you love me, as I love you, you will bring *both*. You will hand the maid the one or the other when you call, or don't see me. Understand I love you with all my heart; I adore you. There never was such a darling as you are—but you know that, you vain fellow! Still you want a love-letter, you want my signature, and what's the cost of a pearl necklace to you, compared with the risk I run in signing this?

“This is not much of a love-letter, but I am not good at that sort of thing. Come to me, my Apollo, my Sun-god.

“SOPHIE DALE.”

## II.

“My dearest Charlie,—You mustn't come tomorrow, and I will tell you why. You and I

understand each other now, so that there is no need for any pretence. At the end of the week I am to meet Lord Amboyna, fresh from Ulster, and his mother's apron-strings. I am getting an old woman now, you know, and I haven't much more time to amuse myself. I wish I had married you; but six weeks ago your father was good for twenty years yet. Really it is most tantalising that he should fall ill now. I hope he won't die yet in spite of the doctors. You are bad enough at present; what will you be when you are my lord? But I'm forgetting what I meant to say. Understand, you are not to see me till after Saturday. I want to be in the very best of form; so I am going to spend the whole time in eating milk-puddings and reading Sir Walter Scott—there's not much difference. I have made 'the Marlate' lock up Ouida and Zola, and she has of her own accord disposed of the wine you sent in some inaccessible corner. But that doesn't matter to me, as you know; I would

sooner drink lemonade than champagne any day. If I get half-an-hour of this young lord, and he's not positively repulsive, I shall be Lady Amboyna in a fortnight. Now, you're not to come, remember, till after Saturday.

"I love you, Charlie, I love you truly. No; I don't want any more money just now, and you're not to send me that ring. I shall never ask anything from you again except what I need. Good-bye, my dearest.

"Your own SOPHIE."

### III.

"My own darling,—Why? why? why? What have I done? I thought you loved me—I did, indeed. And you swore to love me—till I married. But I have loved you too well, and you are tired of me. That's it. You needn't tell me that you are going to change your life now that you have become a peer. You have found

somebody younger, fresher, fairer and harder to be won. In love there are no Alexanders. See, my despair makes me witty. There are always new worlds to conquer, and the old one is as if it had never been. It is hard to bear, Charlie. I love you as a wife loves her husband. I love you now. I shall always love you. You are proud, and I don't think there is a soft corner in your heart anywhere; but hard hearts can love in their own hard way, and I thought you loved me, I did indeed. I don't know what I shall do. I was never so miserable all my life. When a woman thinks that a man loves her, it doesn't matter how—but for herself, for something about her, and because she loves him, to find that she is mistaken maddens her. I think I could kill you, Charlie. I understand how women throw vitriol now. Wouldn't it spoil your fair face!

“Oh! Charlie Mountstuart, shall I never see you again? I do love you! I do love you! When I whisper your name to myself I feel as if



little flames were shooting along my veins: it thrills me like a great deed at a play. I have the flowers you gave me; they are ruined now, for I have killed them with despairing kisses! I love you! Come to me; come to me once more. Only let me see you once more—I have a little favour to ask—not money. You will see me for that at least, will you not?

“Yours till death,

“SOPHIE DALE.

“P.S.—When you are tired of her will you come back to me? Yes, I’ve lost all my pride. I love you. My darling, come back to me.”

For half-an-hour after the perusal and re-perusal of these letters L’Estrange sat motionless. He might have sat there till his wife came to find him had not a waiter entered the room.

The noise of the door opening startled him out of his semi-conscious state, and he rose from his chair with a suddenness that made the waiter, who had not observed him on entering, fall back two steps on his road to place an illustrated paper on one of the tables.

"Waiter," said L'Estrange, and he wondered if that dry, husky voice was his own.

"Yes, sir."

As L'Estrange did not follow his summons with an immediate order, the waiter suggested, "Something to drink, sir?"

"No."

"Beg pardon, sir."

"I want a room to myself for an hour."

"A room to yourself, sir? Yes, sir. What kind of a room?"

"Any room. This one."

"This one, sir? A public room, sir. I'm afraid it couldn't be done, sir."

"Any room then."

“Yes, sir. This way, sir.”

Slowly L'Estrange followed the waiter along several corridors, and when the man stopped at a door, he halted two yards from it. He was loth to enter. He looked at the waiter wistfully and gave him a sovereign.

“Much obliged, my lord,” said the waiter.

“Don't my lord me, you fool,” said L'Estrange savagely.

“Beg pardon, sir. I'm very sorry, sir,” said the waiter, who began to be frightened.

He stepped into the room, held the door back, and made a profound obeisance. L'Estrange advanced and looked in curiously. He was loth to enter. It was a little room, about four yards square, with two windows, one table, one chair; the floor was covered with striped matting, and the walls with a very light paper and a very dark dado. The Venetian blinds were drawn down, and he noticed that they were half a foot too short for the windows, and wondered at it.

He shuddered and drew back. The waiter, having decided that he was quite mad, was on the point of departing, when L'Estrange said it was a fine morning in so kind a tone that the waiter took heart, and replied cheerfully that it was "a very fine morning indeed, sir."

L'Estrange leant against the wall with his hands in his pockets and looked at the waiter. He was loth to enter that room; for there he had to think out the most terrible problem that could fall to the lot of a bridegroom to consider on the morning after his marriage.

"Are you married?" asked L'Estrange.

"Yes, sir," said the waiter.

The waiter was more certain than ever that L'Estrange was mad; and a strange kind of madness he thought it too, going about hotels tipping waiters sovereigns to talk about their family matters. As L'Estrange put no further question, the waiter concluded that he had not said enough in answer to the first one; so he

pulled down his cuffs, and curled in the tail of his coat which had a tendency to protrude and vibrate like the long feathers of a wagtail, and took up his parable with a jerky volubility that would have amused L'Estrange at any other time.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Been married three times. Widows, sir—three widows, sir. 'Take my advice,' I said to boots only yesterday, 'and leave the third chambermaid alone. Marry a widow; there's no safety except in a widow.' You see, sir, you've nothing to do with her character before she was married. You get a hold of her while her eyes are wet for the late departed, and marry her before her character as a widow needs any keeping. I make it a rule to marry them after two months. My first wife, now, sir. It was two months and three weeks after the death of the late departed before I married her, and a barber's assistant transpired afterwards as having been attentive before I

came on the scene. Two months is my limit. You see, sir—”

“Put the key in the inside of the door,” said L’Estrange.

“The — Yes, sir.”

“No one is to come here. Answer no questions about me.”

“Yes, sir; no, sir.”

“Go away.”

The man turned from the door leaving it open, bit the sovereign, and spat on it for luck. “I hope he ain’t a-going to do anything desp’rit,” he muttered under his breath. “Pore chap, he seems tottery, and tangled-like. It ain’t my business; and it’s a good sovereign.”

L’Estrange watched him along the corridor and out of sight, and then he entered the room, slowly. Had the room been a life-prison and his feet fettered, he could not have been more unwilling to cross the threshold. He shut and locked the door and leant against it for some time

fumbling with his watch-guard. Then, slowly, heavily, with a face like the face of a corpse, and his arms hanging as if they had been broken, he walked to the table, and sitting down at it took out the letters. He clutched them tightly, and held them up to his eyes, but they fell from his hands, and he rose with a long, low wail.

"This—is—Hell," he said; and his face for a moment was illuminated by the realisation of that fact. A hideous illumination: he, Robert L'Estrange, was now actually, as it were, in Hell. This fearful perturbation, this brain of boiling lead—it was worse than Hell. And for what sin of his? Why should he suffer this torture? Had he been a libertine, had he even led the ordinary life of a man of pleasure, there would have been some justice in it. Oh, it was bitter! He had never prided himself on his purity! He had regarded it more as an accident than as a virtue; but the habit of it had made vice poison to him—and he despised it. And now the hateful, foul

thing—he had taken it to his bosom. The deep, blue eyes, to look into which had been more than compensation for his lost ambition; the thick long locks of golden hair that had shone round her head last night in the darkness like an aureole; the sweet, earnest, child-like mouth whose kisses were like dew-drops; the little soft hands, soft and sweet—Ah, God! the foul little hands that wrote these letters, that had caressed Tintock—her favoured lover; the sorceress's eyes that would delude an angel; the child-like mouth that had been pressed by his rival; the golden hair which another had toyed and dallied with.

Up and down the room; up and down, with his hands thrust to the bottom of his pockets, and his teeth gnawing his under-lip, like a wild beast caged.

Up and down, up and down at feverish speed. It keeps him from thinking. Could he not walk so driving away thought till he dies? Wildly he dreams of that for a moment; but his brain gets



accustomed to the motion; and, excited by it, becomes prodigiously active. A verbal memory is not one of L'Estrange's gifts; but what is this? "You stupid dear, do I love you? Is there anything left for me to do to prove it? Come, come, come to me! etc." And on he goes through the whole three letters, not a word forgotten; they are seared on his brain and heart. Again he repeats the letters; quicker yet he marches. Dry, awful sobs burst from him at every sentence, as the utter, shameless wantonness of this—this brazen harlot, whom he has married, burns into his soul. She, so fair, so sweet, so innocent-looking! What does it mean? Can she know what she has done? Can she know what she is? No; it is impossible. She is not so bad as that. No; she has no conscience to sin against; she does not know what she has done; in a sense, she is innocent; as innocent as a tiger that preys on human life; it is instinct, an irrational, unprincipled hunger for wealth, ease,

luxury. The wretch finds consolation in that for a little. "Innocent," he whispers: "not in the sight of man; but in the sight of God who made her thus, who allows her to live still. What business is it of mine, or of anybody's, since He tolerates her? Innocent! Innocent in the sight of God!"

Up and down, up and down. Now he forgets himself, and lurches against the wall or stumbles against the table. He takes the room diagonally. Up and down, up and down. He drives the table into the centre, and walks round it, narrowing the circle. Suddenly he stops. What wild light of hope flashes on his face? Why are his hands held up in appeal—an appeal that looks potent enough to make the sun stand still? He flings himself on the letters; draws up the blind with a sudden crash; and reads, reads yet once more. The wild light fades away like the glow on a dying brand, and his face is as gray as ashes. The letters are not forged.

He sits down at the table and takes out his pencil. He has been accustomed to gain command of his thoughts by writing them down. He will control himself, and write on the back of the envelope. He begins, "My dearest Charlie, you must not come to-morrow." No; there is no hope in writing—"Sophie Dale—Sophie L'Estrange—yes, she's Sophie L'Estrange." Why should he have to suffer this torture? His heart will burst; his head will open. His ewe-lamb—that was never his; that had been taken from him before he knew her at all. Again the dreadful weary walk—round and round, panting, with blood-shot eyes, like a horse in a mill. And he was married yesterday.

Married to what? There could be but one answer to that question. Oh God! since she is false, what of other women? She, the loveliest vision of innocent beauty. He beat his head on the wall, he tore his hair, and shrunk into a corner, this honest man. Only to rush from it, and let

down the blind, and whisper, shudderingly, "Curse her!" He repeated the words over and over; he couldn't cease saying it; louder and louder like a maniac these two words until he fell on the floor, struggling, foaming, biting the matting to still that hysterical cry, for, for the moment, the man was mad. Slowly the paroxysm passed, and he lay moaning, like a creature that had been wounded to death.

At last he got up, and seated himself once more at the table. He must resolve on something.

Divorce? No!

He rose, and sat down again. Divorce? What his fierce walking, his maniacal frenzy, had failed to do, that word did. The sweat broke out on his face. His mind grew clearer—to himself it grew quite clear. The heat in his brain seemed to resolve itself into lightning. Flash by flash he made up his mind. It came to him like a revelation. He knew now what he meant to do—what he would do. He took a slow turn across the

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room. The law couldn't help him, no, even if it could, would he have sought its help? She was in his hands; he was judge, and advocate, for and against; and this was his sentence, all of it that he spoke aloud, that is to say:—

“I can never forgive her; but *if she will confess*, I will leave her punishment to God.”



## CHAPTER IX.

### WAS DESDEMONA UNFAITHFUL ?

“ANGUS FRAZER!” said Mrs. L’Estrange, when she entered the sitting-room. “What good fortunè has brought you here?”

She knew nothing of him except that he had attempted suicide, and that her husband liked him.

“Good fortune, I hope,” said Angus ; and he told her his errand, and gave her L’Estrange’s message.

“We will sit in the balcony till he comes then,” said Mrs. L’Estrange.

Angus placed a chair for Mrs. L’Estrange, and stood up in a corner himself. No entreaty or command was of any avail ; he would not bring a chair for himself. It would have been a kind of disloyalty to L’Estrange, in his estimation, to sit down in the presence of his wife.

"Very well, Angus Frazer, you're a cantankerous old man," said Sophie, pouting prettily.

"I can't help it, ma'am," said Angus. "I'm left-handed; and it may be a left-handed compliment to stand before you, but as it would be stupid to kneel, I must do it."

"Do you know I was left-handed until I was eight," said Sophie pleasantly. "Many a bitter, bitter cry I had before I was cured of it."

"And has it never come back?" inquired Angus with great interest.

"Never," said Mrs. L'Estrange.

"You ought to be very thankful, ma'am, if you will only let me say so. See what magnificent luck you have, marrying Mr. L'Estrange. If they had only driven it out of me! Why, they should have cut off my left hand! I wonder I never thought of that before. I should think that would cure the most inveterate, long-descended kittiness."

"Kittiness?" queried Sophie; and Frazer had to explain.



She laughed a sunny little laugh, and asked Angus about Scotland. Nothing loth, he told her about his own dear country, its scenery, the peculiarities of its people, and had twisted the matter round to his favourite theory of left-handedness, pointing out that it plainly affected countries as well as people; for if you regarded London as the head of England, "then Scotland largely, and Ireland entirely, lying to the left," when his mouth closed with a snap, and he stepped from his corner and leant half over the balcony. Involuntarily Mrs. L'Estrange's gaze followed his, and lit on Lord Tintock.

"Do you know that gentleman?" asked Mrs. L'Estrange, agitated and perplexed.

Angus did not reply until Lord Tintock, who walked very leisurely, cigar in mouth, was out of sight.

"I know him," said Angus.

"Why do you look in that way?" asked Mrs. L'Estrange.

"Do *you* know Lord Tintock, ma'am?"

"I have met him."

"I had a daughter once, and—I had a daughter once." Angus saw from the expression of Mrs. L'Estrange's face that that brief sentence was significant enough. "I think Mr. L'Estrange will soon be here. Will you allow me to go now?"

"What are you going to do? Where are you going?" Sophie knew by instinct what was in Angus's mind. "You are not going to harm Lord Tintock? For your own sake, I mean. You're not going to make a 'fuss?'"

"No, ma'am; I will not harm him. He has harmed himself too much already for anything to hurt him, except the fires of hell."

"What do you mean? He is very strong and healthy."

"I meant something else."

"I don't understand you?"

"Disease, death, torture; these would do Lord

Tintock no harm ; they might do him good, and certainly his death would be a benefit to the world."

"Angus Frazer, do you mean to harm Lord Tintock ?"

"I did once."

"Do you mean it now ?"

"I don't know."

"I understand you are very much attached to my husband. I think he and Tintock are friends ; you would not do anything to hurt my husband ?"

"I would sacrifice everything," said Angus fervently, "to save your husband's body or mind from a moment's pain. I must go now. May I go ?"

"What shall I say to Mr. L'Estrange ?"

"Say, please, that I will be back in an hour."

Mrs. L'Estrange nodded.

When Angus Frazer had gone Mrs. L'Estrange

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had food enough for reflection to prevent her from noticing for half an hour her husband's unbridegroom-like absence from her side. She was uneasy at Lord Tintock's arrival in Folkestone. The worst that she dreaded, however, was the unpleasantness of a meeting with her old lover, and she revolved various speeches and remarks that she might make in the event of such a *contretemps*. Having made up her mind that all would yet be well—trusting in her luck—she went in search of her husband. He was not in the writing-room; nor could anybody tell her anything of him. She fretted for a little; but, as nothing better could be made of it, she returned to the balcony with a paper, and was soon lost in the glories of a “drawing-room.” Racing interested her a little; a Paris letter, and the Divorce Court considerably; then she became impatient. What did her husband mean? Was he trying her? Was this some kind of lesson for her? She banished that idea

at once. During their short acquaintance, she had been puzzling out her husband, and though often at fault, and still at fault in some things, she knew that he was as far above any trick of that kind, as he was above stealing spoons. There was, therefore, something seriously wrong, and she shrewdly guessed that it must affect them both, or else he would have interrupted whatever he was doing to set her mind at rest. But no, how could she be directly implicated? Something about his money, perhaps; or some friend had got into a scrape, or he had met somebody, and gone out for a minute, and the time had passed; a hundred things might detain him: and he would be the less pressed to return, as he imagined her with Angus Frazer. Anything like the real reason never crossed her mind.

The sun got very hot, and she left the balcony for the cooler room. She sat on all the chairs, and reclined on the couch. Then she paced the floor with little angry steps. The clock struck

one. That was more than two hours she had waited. It was too bad—too bad, indeed. Was ever a bride so treated on the morning after her marriage? If this were the way of it now, what would it be in a year? But she reined up that train of thought; she knew there was some cause, some sufficient cause for his absence: there was nothing of the male coquette about her husband.

A step in the passage.

Yes, it is he.

She hurried into the balcony, sat down with her back to the entrance, put up her sunshade, and tapped her little brown shoe with a mixture of actual and stimulated anger.

L'Estrange had tried to brush away all traces of his mental conflict; but a broad blue and yellow bruise on his left temple could not be hidden. He took a chair out to the balcony and sat down in silence. His wife looked at the sea, and so did he. The little brown shoe kept

tapping—there were tears in the gentle eyes—but he was motionless.

“Well?” said Sophie, sharply, breaking the silence at last.

“I have received some very remarkable news, and could not return a moment sooner,” said L’Estrange in a deep voice, that made his wife start and turn towards him: she had never heard it before; nor had she ever seen this man in this strange mood.

“What has happened?” she cried, laying her hand on his shoulder. “Something *has* happened.” Then, noticing the bruise, “Have you had a fall? Oh, Robert!”

“Yes, I have had a *fall*,” said L’Estrange simply, removing her hand from his shoulder. “Don’t ask me any more questions just now. I’ll tell you all about it—later on.”

“Are you angry with me, Robert? Surely not. Surely, surely my darling will be good to me to-day—to-day of all days in the year?”

He shivered and said nothing.

"Are you ill? What is it? what is it?"

"I have a headache," he said.

"Oh, let me bathe it with my handkerchief."

"No!"

"Oh, Robert, you are almost rude!"

"No, Sophie; I'm not rude." He pulled himself together and spoke gently. "I am not rude."

Then, as if he had been a madman indeed, he sprang from his chair and rushed into the room, banging the French window behind him. For the first time since Tintock's packet had come he remembered the conversation in the balcony the night before, with her seemingly guileless confession. He *must* have struck her had he stayed, or flung her over. He must have cast her from the window, that Jezebel. Hardly had he entered the room when a couple of waiters came to lay the luncheon. He directed them to postpone it for a while, and having drunk a tumbler of water, paced the room silently for a minute or two.



“Get her to confess—help her to confess, and then leave her for ever.” Yes, he must master himself, and do that.

He returned to the balcony, and found his wife—*his wife*—in tears. He patted her on the shoulder, stroked her cheek, and whispered in her ear some gentle words. Like a child who gets a new toy, in the midst of its grief for a broken one, she looked up, smiled, and her tears were gone, like a summer shower.

“Let us talk about ourselves. Let us talk about you, Sophie,” he said. “Forget all about the world and its troubles. We can’t go out now till after lunch.”

“It’s lunch-time now, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but—are you hungry?”

“No, dear.”

“I thought not; so I put it off. Tell me, Sophie, what books have you read—besides Zola?”

“Oh, I’ve read Scott, and Dickens, and some of Shakespeare, and—”

"Do you like Shakespeare? Which of his women do you like best?"

"I'm sure I don't know. But since we're talking about Shakespeare, I want to ask you a question. What do you think of Desdemona?"

"Of Desdemona?"

"Yes. Do you think she *was* unfaithful to Othello?"

L'Estrange sat up, and stared at his wife.

"Not even an American has suggested that yet," he said.

"What do you think?"

"I think that she was faithful. Shakespeare thought so, too."

"But he might have been mistaken. She would never have confessed it; and Cassio would never have confessed it."

"Perhaps she wouldn't, but I'm not so sure of Cassio."

He was thinking of Lord Tintock.

"I've often wondered," she said, naïvely.

"If you were to be unfaithful, Sophie," and he laughed a little, bitter laugh, "would you confess it?"

"Oh, Robert! How can you say it? How can you even think it, dear?"

"Let me say it for a moment. Would you?"

She looked at him searchingly, and her sweet, blue eyes filled with tears. She said nothing.

"Suppose, then," he said, "I lied to you last night."

"Lied to me?"

"Yes. Suppose I had loved another, and confess to it now. Could you forgive me?"

"But you didn't. Even supposing you were to say it now, I shouldn't believe you; just as you wouldn't believe me if I were to say I had been another's."

"Just as I wouldn't believe you if you were to say you had been another's." He repeated her words mechanically.

"Oh, this is dreadful talk; but I began it with

Desdemona. Let us talk of something else, dear. What shall we do after lunch ?”

“ We’ll take a walk on The Lees, I think. By-the-bye, what’s come over Angus ? ”

“ Oh, I’m glad you remembered ! When he and I were sitting here, you’ll never guess who passed. Lord Tintock.”

He sat mute.

“ And Angus told me about his daughter, that is, he hinted it. And I made him promise to do Lord Tintock no harm ; but I’m certain he went out to follow him. He said he would be back in an hour, and that’s more than two hours ago now.”

“ Poor Angus Frazer ! Don’t you pity Angus Frazer, Sophie ? ”

“ Yes, I do pity him, poor old man,” she said, and then she sighed.

“ What a miserable hound Tintock must be.”

“ Oh, Robert ! He is no worse than many other men.”

"That's true."

"Then he's so handsome. It was perhaps the girl's fault as much as his. Do you know, I think that men are not pitied half enough."

"No!"

"What's wrong with you, dear?" she pleaded in a half-frightened tone.

"Nothing. I'm wondering where you got all this worldly wisdom."

"Is that worldly wisdom?"

"Of a kind. You seem to know Lord Tintock pretty well. Perhaps you got it from him."

And then she laughed. A silvery little laugh. "I declare that my old husband's getting jealous already," she said.

"Do you think I shall ever be jealous, really?" he asked.

"I don't know, but I know that I shall never give you cause," said the bride of a few short hours.

"But suppose I were to be jealous of somebody

you had known before I met you; of Lord Tintock, for example," he insisted.

"Oh, you silly goose. A man I have only met once or twice in crowded drawing-rooms."

"But just suppose now that I were to take it into my head to believe that you had met him in other places."

"I shall soon get quite angry with you, Robert. But I'll *suppose* it; and now let us get this nasty talk done."

"And suppose that you were to confess to me that I had cause for jealousy."

"Well, I'll *suppose* that too. Now, what would you do?"

"I would settle half of my income on you, and leave you." But he didn't say that. It was in his mind to say it, and had there been the least hesitation, the least sign of wavering in his wife's cool, adorable effrontery, he would have said it to try to bribe a confession from her. What he did say was, "I think you're right. I think it's pos-

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sible that even Desdemona may have been unfaithful."

She looked at him wonderingly. "Every woman's past is her own, Robert," she remarked sententiously.

And then the waiter brought in the lunch.





## CHAPTER X.

### ON THE CLIFF.

IF her husband's questionings had roused suspicion in Mrs. L'Estrange's mind that something concerning her past life had come to his knowledge, his extraordinary kindness and solicitude now obliterated it.

When the waiter was gone she said: "One would think, dear, that I was going on a long journey, you've been so anxious about me. Do you know, sir, that you have made me take too much wine? One little wee sip is quite enough for me; and to tell you the truth I would as soon have lemonade as champagne. Are you ill, Robert? You're quite white again."

The words had stung him.

“That horrid letter this morning! When are you going to tell me all about that letter? Do let me share this trouble of yours.”

“Come out in the air,” he said, “come out in the air. After we’ve had some fresh air, you *shall* share it—what you can share of it.”

It was a glorious day, warm, soft—wanting just the edge of a breeze to give it brilliancy. Out at sea there was a breath moving with a hint of coolness, that made one long either to be upon the water, or in it. But at Folkestone nobody bathes in the afternoon; contact with the interior of a bathing-machine wouldn’t add to the fresh crispness of a muslin dress, and, as a rule, according to that irrefutable authority, the lady’s-maid, “the hair won’t take a curl immediately after a sea-bath.” That wouldn’t have mattered one jot to Mrs. L’Estrange, for her lovely golden tresses had a dear little natural wave in them, which could never have been produced by the most dexterous use of

the curling-tongs, or even by that artful appliance, Jones' Patent Hair-undulator.

The bride was wonderfully lovely that afternoon. A pretty woman, like an expensive dinner, is nothing unless well-dressed—that is to say, since Eve's unlucky dessert. And Mrs. L'Estrange was well dressed. You would have looked some time at her, before you could have begun to consider what her dress was, it fitted her so well, and was so harmonious. If it had a fault it was this, that it was more suitable to the unmarried girl than to the young married woman; a fault against convention, but not against her appearance. Her cream coloured frock was of a soft, filmy material, a little pink bow or two, a big straw hat, which set off the charming face and gave it a sort of eighteenth century stamp; that was all. And the tiny brown shoes and gloves—had been bought at the right places.

Certainly she was the loveliest of all the lovely women to be seen that afternoon at Folkestone

walking on the Lees. As her husband looked at her, with eyes like burning glasses, whose glances might have pierced to her very soul and seared it, he thought of Lalage :—

“Dulce ridentem Lalagen amabo,  
Dulce loquentem.”

Truly that was his wife. The furniture of her brain might be ricketty and foul; her heart might be clothed in a jacket of shoddy, and her soul in rags, but she *was* Lalage, laughing sweetly, talking sweetly; and he had sworn but yesterday to love and cherish her till death did them part. His dulled imagination began to play devils tricks with this idea, and conjured up hideous visions that made him groan aloud.

“I am not surprised at your sighing, Robert,” said Sophie. “The heat is intolerable. If it’s cool anywhere on such a day as this, it’ll be cool upon the water. I rage, I burn, the cruel god has struck me to the heart,” and she playfully shook her tiny fist at Phoebus Apollo. “In another hour,

Robert, I shall become ruddier than the cherry, and you—all your paleness is gone, you dear, delightful, bronzed old darling, and you're getting more and more like a Red Indian every minute."

"It is confoundedly hot," he said. "Why shouldn't we try the water?"

The young bride clapped her hands.

"Yes," she said with dainty little motions of her head and poutings of her lips. "Let us get a great roomy boat and a sort of Mr. Peggotty to row us, and you shall be Ham, Robert, and I'll be your little Em'ly."

Then she pressed close to him and began to sing softly:—

" 'I have sinned, and I have suffered,  
More than words of mine can tell.  
And—'

Bah, I've forgotten the rest. Can you help me, Robert?" But she didn't wait for his answer. "What a fool that great, big, strong, stupid fellow Ham was! Wasn't he, Rob?"

He didn't answer at first. This was a mood totally new to him. Sophie had never attempted to exercise her *câlinerie* upon him before; she had always kept to his ideal of her; the frank, innocent, sunny-hearted girl who revered her husband as much as she loved him; but she wanted a little more freedom, she wanted to be familiar with her husband, and so she ejaculated that particularly frivolous "Bah," and called him "Rob." She was tiring of this dreadful, earnest, old-world love of his.

"I suppose he *was* a fool, Sophie," he replied at length. "I suppose he was a stupid, trusting fool. I suppose he was. He grinned and bore his misfortune; those sort of fellows can—so much the better for them."

By this time they had reached the beach.

"There's not one of them," said Mrs. L'Estrange, throwing her eyes along the meditative row of fine-weather sailors, "who's a bit like Mr. Peggotty."

"I'll row you myself, Sophie," said her husband.

"Will you really? Oh, you dear, good-natured old darling, that'll be too delightful. Two's company, you know. If you really don't mind it, Robert, it'll be quite an idyll. I shall be so glad to do without Mr. Peggotty, after all."

L'Estrange's eye ran along the numerous row-boats, which lay ready for hire upon the beach; then he singled out one of particularly light draught, painted black, with brass rowlocks; a smart boat enough, and evidently new.

"I should think this would suit us," said L'Estrange, as he indicated the handsome little craft.

"Nice day for a row, sir," observed the proprietor as he advanced. "I must ask you two-and-six for this little clipper, sir, and it's a couple of shillings for the man, for I suppose you'll want some one to pull you, a day like this," and then he touched his hat, as in the manner of the men of sea.

"I'd rather take the sculls myself, I think," said L'Estrange.

"Well, then, I couldn't recommend *her*," said the man, "unless you're an old hand, sir; for, the fact is, she's a bit crank. Now, the Polly Anne, sir"—indicating a solid little dingey about the size and build of a railway carriage—"is the sort of boat I should recommend for any gent as isn't, so to speak, exactly a waterman."

"Don't listen to him, Robert," said his wife, as she held out her hand to be helped into the lighter craft. "I'll take my seat as pleasure at the helm, while you shall feather the oars with skill and dexterity at the prow."

L'Estrange nodded, and got into the boat without further parley, and, turning to the proprietor, said, "Shove us off, my man; it'll be all right."

"It ain't any business of mine," said the man surlily.

The stern of the boat was already in the water,



her owner gave one good, honest shove, there was a grating of the shingle, and she slid into the sea like a duck, a glossy black duck. L'Estrange seized the sculls, and began to row with long powerful strokes steadily out to sea. His wife took off one glove, and allowed her little aristocratic hand, that glittered with costly gems, to trail in the water; she sang little fragments of songs, lost to everything save the mere sense of pure physical enjoyment.

Who was it that followed them from the hotel to the beach, and went up the Lees by the hydraulic lift as the boat pushed off? A handsome man very much interested in them evidently, for he carried a field-glass and watched them through it. When he saw that they went straight out to sea he walked rapidly along, taking an occasional glance through his glass, till he came to the higher cliffs near Sandgate. And who was it—an old man, uncouthly dressed, who followed him? We shall see.

The young man lay down on the edge of the cliff, and watched the boat. A languid, satisfied look was on his handsome face. He chuckled as he gazed out on the little boat and its occupants. His face reminded one of Caligula's, without its frantic idiocy. As he lolled there, you might have imagined him watching listlessly for the lions to pounce on the helpless Christians. But it was reversed, a lion pounced on him. Ere he could cry out, he was on his back, his head hanging over the cliff, a knee on his chest and a hand—a clutching hand—upon his throat.

“One word above your breath, an’ I’ll fling ye owre.”

The young man's face was fast becoming purple ; he signed with his head that he would be quiet, and his throat was released. He looked intently at the old man, and recognising him said, “Oh, you're Frazer.”

“I am, Lord Tintock, and Providence has delivered you into my hand.”

"Be quick about it then," said Tintock, closing his eyes.

"No, I'm going to give you a chance," answered Angus.

"Be quick then either way, for this is uncomfortable."

"I've watched you spying on Mr. and Mrs. L'Estrange."

"That is, you've spied on me."

"Quite so. There's something wrong there, some calamity, you ken o', likely to happen, an' maybe have a hand in. If you'll tell me the whole story I'll let you off. It's your only chance, man."

"With the greatest pleasure in life."

"Tell me then."

"Pledge me your word that the moment I have told you all—and you'll know perfectly when I've said the whole—you'll let me get up."

"I swear it."

Tintock was a gentleman, according to his

lights. He confessed, and implicated a woman—but—it was to save his life—and he dearly loved life. Life was everything to Tintock.

“Well, then, Mrs. L'Estrange was my mistress for two months. Her husband received a letter proving that this morning. I want to see how he takes it. Well, why don't you let me go?”

“Yes,” said the old man, very quietly; “that's all. Get up. Ye're but a white-livered deil, if ye *are* a lord. Get up!”

Lord Tintock rose. He was very white, but he was also very cool. He dusted his clothes with his handkerchief, and then picked up his field-glass. Angus watched him with set face, and clenched hands. There were about two yards between the men, and each stood two yards from the brow of the cliff.

“Wretch!” cried Angus, springing on his enemy again and clutching at his throat.

“Off, off!” said Tintock. “You swore to let me go.”

"I swore to let you *up*," said Angus, throttling the struggling lord, who, though a strong man, was powerless against the mad rage of the old Scotchman. "You understand it to mean that you were to go scot free, and I meant it so at the [time. But I'll make myself a liar. I've changed my mind, man!"

He spoke with fierce deliberation; his very Doric accent was almost gone.

For a minute there was a violent struggle. Neither of them knew anything about wrestling; they grasped each other anyhow, kicking and striking, and rolled over and over to within a foot of the edge. There Angus got on Tintock's back, and beat his face mercilessly on the rock, hissing between his set teeth, "You shall ruin no more women with your fashion-plate face, and break no more father's hearts."

Then when his enemy was stunned, he rose and lifted him in his arms above his head.

"You ruined my daughter, you've ruined my

friend. Go down to hell," he shrieked, as he flung him over.

He watched the body fall; then he seized the glass, and looked out to sea.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE MERCY OF SIR GALAHAD.

“ROBERT!” said Sophie.

No answer.

“Robert!” and then there was an impatient stamp of the little, brown, high-heeled, Louis Quinze shoe.

“Robert, are you going to take me to Boulogne?”

L'Estrange shipped the sculls.

“You're ill again, Robert. Oh, what is it? Why are you so pale? Why do you look at me like that? Speak to me, Robert. Robert, you frighten me.”

L'Estrange opened his mouth, but no sound came. His lips trembled, and he shivered as if with cold.

“Shall I try the sculls, Robert? You’ve—”

He held out his left hand rigidly pointing at her. Thoroughly frightened she half rose. But where could she go? The boat was a mere cockle shell, and the shore was two miles distant at least.

“Sophie,” he began, but he got no further. His arm fell, and the dry sobs that had racked him in the hotel seemed to tear a passage through his breast. Blanched and fascinated with horror, Mrs. L’Estrange leant forward and watched him. It was soon her turn to sob.

When the paroxysm was past, with a calm face and clear enunciation he repeated, from beginning to end, the matter of Sophie’s three letters. A fearful cry burst from the terrified woman when she recognised the damning proof of her infamy, then she sunk in a heap and thrust her fingers in her ears, but that was useless; his voice would have found her in the depths of the earth. When he had done speaking she attempted to rise.



“Sit still,” he said, in the same clear, firm voice, “or I will brain you with this scull. I loved you, by God! I love you now! I think that you are better than those letters, that you are better than your past life. I think that though the world cannot forgive you God can; and I think—I think—that now I too can forgive you.”

She looked up through her tears and held out her arms towards him. He shivered, and the sobs seemed about to return—she was so lovely—so like a stained angel weeping for the sins of another. But he mastered himself, and went on.

“In God’s sight, you may be innocent. His mercy is boundless, and you may have been tempted past your power to resist. I hope so—I believe so. Sophie, Sophie.”

His voice was breaking, and again she held out her arms; but he waved her back, raising the scull menacingly.

“I am not going to blame you, Sophie, keep

back ! keep back ! I'm not going to blame you. I did : but not now. I have a clearer apprehension. I seem to know what God wants me to do. There was no punishment for the woman taken in adultery : to errors of passion Heaven is very merciful. Mary Magdalene was a harlot too, Sophie, and she repented, and was forgiven. But you are a harlot with no excuse of passion, unless, perchance, you did love him ; and you have *not* repented. Your case is different from these two. But I think I know what God would have me do. I believe that you have a soul, but that it has hardly even budded yet. Try to understand me, Sophie ; I am saying it as simply as I can. I believe that you are better than you have been, innocent in the sight of Heaven because you had no chance, poor girl. Now, we must test that. We are man and wife, Sophie, but we cannot live together. Your body is leprous with sin, but—so help me God, I think your soul has never sinned, for it has slept. No circumstance in your life was ever of a kind to waken it, no one

ever helped you, poor child, to be better. I tried this morning, Sophie; but your soul has been so long asleep that I couldn't waken it. We may not live together, but we can die together. Come, Sophie, let us plunge into the sea. I will answer to God for it, if it be a sin; *you* will not be held responsible for that. I will forgive all Sophie, if you will do this thing, and it is no sin. I feel that God wills it. He exists for us to fly to in our despair. Come, Sophie, I know that God will say you are innocent, and our souls will yet be one—in another world.”

He rose, and laid his hand gently on her shoulder; but she shrank away.

“Mercy, mercy!” she screamed, looking up with a ghastly face expressive of nothing but terror. “Mercy, mercy! I cannot die. I will go away from you. I will leave England. I will change my name. I will never see you again. Mercy, mercy!”

“You are my wife, Sophie. I love you, and

I shall not give you the dreadful doom you desire. To let you live would be the only true death, for you would damn yourself past redemption. I love you and I forgive you, and we shall go to the Judgment Seat together."

He placed his foot on the thwart, and leant his whole weight upon it; the water rippled into the boat, and as it gradually filled, it tilted more and more. Sophie L'Estrange clasped and unclasped her hands; leant to the opposite side and screamed aloud in her agony of fear. Oh, she was loth to die! It took but a little while to capsize the boat. As the water poured in she spoke wildly and with extraordinary rapidity.

"It's wrong! It's wrong!" she shrieked. "I can't die yet. I am so young. It's base and cruel to kill me. I've never had any pleasure; I've never been at peace, all my life. I've never known happiness; yesterday I was happy for the first time. Married, a wife, a happy, happy wife at last, and I saw my life stretching out

before me calm and sinless. I'm young, too young to die. It's wrong, it's wrong, it's cruel! I've been miserable all my life, all my life; and I've a right to be happy before I die. Monster, madman! will you kill me? Oh, if I'd known the kind of man you are! Why did you marry me? What right had you to marry me? You should have taken a nun from a cloister; you should have made a woman for yourself. Oh! the water, oh! oh! oh! It's a lie; I didn't do it. I never loved Tintock, I didn't write those letters. As God's in heaven, I'm innocent. Save me! Save me! Robert! my husband! save me!"

For a moment or two the buoyancy of her garments sustained her, and then, still screaming wildly, she sank. L'Estrange kept himself afloat with hardly an effort, for he was a practised swimmer. He turned a forlorn look to the sky. The glad sun shone in the cloudless heaven, busy with its own great affairs. It didn't see

him, he felt. But the blue heavens seemed to shudder and shrink higher up. He gazed at the sea around, with the same weary, homeless look in his eyes. It moved, and whispered, and the glib wavelets seemed to mock him, laughing and telling each other what had been done. He looked to the shore: and the pale affrighted cliff warned him off from the green land above. His mouth fell; for a moment the poor wretch whimpered. What is that a few yards away rising through the water? It is his wife, his wife! He gave a great shout, and swam towards the place where she seemed about to appear.

"Sophie," he said; "Sophie," and the tears rained from his eyes.

They'll be happy yet. She has this to forgive. They'll cry quits, and be happy yet. But the refraction of the water deceived him; she was out of his reach when she rose. Her hands struggled in the air; a faint cry

of "Robert" reached his ears, and she sank again. He dived after her; but that was useless. There was a current, and the boat had floated close behind him. He seized the upturned keel: he held it in his left hand, and the boat drifted. Three times bodies rise. He will save her yet.

What a blaspheming villain he is! He sees it all now: the fearful mistake he has made. He has put himself in the place of God; he has taken the power of life and death into his own hands. Her guilt is nothing to his: but it is well. Oh, it is very well! He is worse than she now. He will save her, he will crave her forgiveness. He will get a whip of wire and make her lash him with it till he faints; and every year she will do that on the anniversary of this day; and restore him with kisses and tears. He will cut himself, and burn himself, he will martyrise himself. And he will love her, as never woman was loved; and they will forgive each other. And she shall bear him children and

give life instead of losing it — poor child-wife.

Why is she so long in rising again? What if she should never rise again! Oh! but God will be merciful.

He wheeled the boat about, and looked all round. Some other current may have caught her, he thought, in an abyss of despair deeper than any he had yet sounded. She may rise far out of his reach. He raised his eyes to heaven; and cried in a loud voice broken with sobs: "Oh God, give me back this woman I would have sent to you before her time. Hear me! Do you hear me, oh, God? I believe in You, I believe in You, the answerer of prayer. Pardon my sin, if it be not unpardonable, and give her back to me. I repent, I bitterly repent, and my whole life shall be one repentance. Hear me, hear me. I shall pray till You send her back. Oh, God, it was not Your will that she should die. She was young and fair, and



her life was sweet and strong; You meant her to live for many a year yet. Send her back, send her back—for her sake, not for mine. Do not let my will, the devil's will, triumph. Let Thy will be done."

That prayer was answered. She rose at his side.

The wearing agony of his terrible passion had left him hardly any strength, and his eyes were blind with tears. "God help me! Help me, oh, my God!" he said in anguish. He managed to get his arm round her neck, and turned her face to him. It was childlike in its still beauty; the eyes were closed, a smile, a saint-like martyr's smile played about the mouth. He had stayed his tears, but they burst from him afresh at the sight of that sweet face, smiling, reproachless. He bent to kiss her mouth; and as he did so the lips opened, and in the faintest whisper came the words "Charlie! oh, Charlie!"

Uttering a fearful curse he rose up out of

the water, and raised his arm as though he would bring his clenched fist down on her face but he relented. Once more he cursed her, and then she sank never to rise again.

For a while he held on to the boat, exhausted, unable to move or think. His eyes were open, but they saw nothing; his lips moved, but they spoke no word. At last his senses began to return. He looked about him, and saw a seagull hovering near. It was watching some object that floated on the water. What?

Only a little, eight-button, brown kid glove that lay like a dead leaf on the blue sparkling waves. Gathering together all his remaining strength, he swam to it, and then returned to his place of safety. Still clinging to the boat, he gazed at the little glove. Last night he held her in his arms, and she had spoken the three words he burned to hear. Of all her beauty, and sweet warm life, her love and her sin, nothing remained to him now, but that little glove. He kissed it

over and over again; he held it to his brow, to his cheeks; he pressed it on his burning eyes. Then, grasping it tightly, he set his teeth, raised his clenched hands high above his head, and sank like a stone.

The sea-gull flew to England, and the boat drifted towards France. The glad sun shone in the cloudless sky. The blue heavens hung lovingly over the waters, and the bright white cliffs smiled at them. The sea moved and whispered, and the glib wavelets told each other how the homeless eyes that had seen the heavens shrink and the earth frown were closed in death.

At the very moment L'Estrange sank, Angus Frazer, who had been watching the tragedy through his victim's field-glass, turned staggering away.

The latest additions of the evening papers announced, "a third mystery to-day, as startling as the other two, and apparently connected with

them : for it was in the rooms of Mr. L'Estrange in King's Bench Walk, that an old man was found shot through the head, with an antique horse pistol in his hand."

So Robert L'Estrange died, having fulfilled the traditions of his race.

Was he justified ?

THE END.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

# THE PIT TOWN CORONET: A FAMILY MYSTERY.

BY

CHARLES WILLS,

AUTHOR OF

“IN THE LAND OF THE LION AND SUN,” “PERSIA AS IT IS,” ETC.

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## OPINIONS OF THE PRESS (*continued*)—

scored a success with a book describing his residence and journeys in Persia, has proved in 'The Pit Town Coronet' that he can also use the running quill, pointed with gall, of the writers of novels of fashionable life. The story is a clear and brilliant one. His strength is rather in the crisp writing, and the keen, humorous, and somewhat cynical sketches of society and country life, and of foreign and English types of character. The Rev. John Dodd and his wife, his curate, and his dissenting rivals, the Old Squire, and the ambitious Steek are excellent."—*Scotsman*.

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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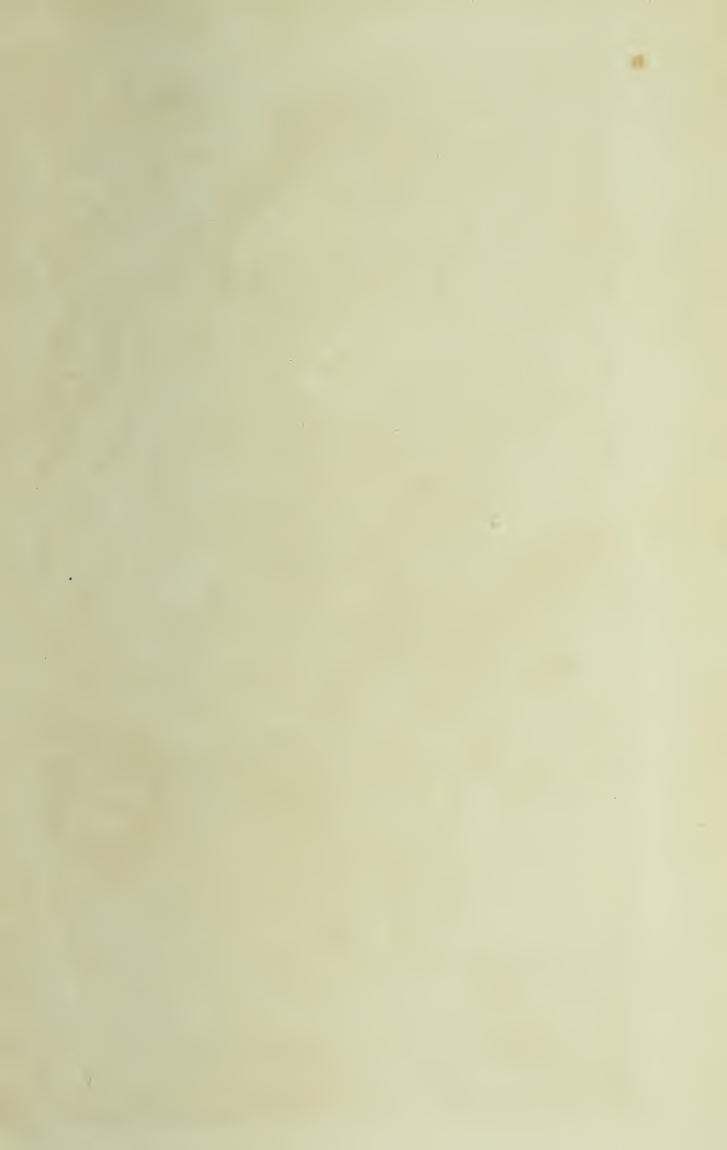
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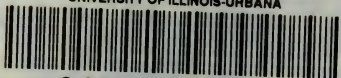






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